

The Cinema of Tobe Hooper

AMERICAN TWILIGHT

EDITED BY KRISTOPHER WOOFER AND WILL DODSON



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University of Texas Press



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“NO PLEASURE IN KILLING”

The Cinema of Tobe Hooper

KRISTOPHER WOOFER AND WILL DODSON

WE TRAVELED TO AUSTIN ON July 29, 2019. We knew it was going to be hot, but knowing a thing doesn't prepare you for a thing. We came to see Tobe Hooper's papers, such as they were. The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin had nine boxes of papers and ephemera. These included still photographs, posters, tax documents, many receipts, correspondence, and stacks and stacks of *Variety*. There were scrapbooks of under- and overexposed frames. Scattered bones. A cigar, lightly smoked. We had been told there wasn't a lot to be found. The curators presented, with slight pomp and much reverence, a recently restored, unused model of a mask for Leatherface. We had hoped we could view Hooper's seldom-seen documentary, *Peter, Paul and Mary: The Song Is Love* (1970, 1971), which he shot and completed around the same time as *Eggshells* (1969). Despite the archive's best efforts and kind assistance, the delicate print it had would need to be transferred digitally frame by frame in order to be viewed, and they were (and are) still awaiting approval to do so from Tobe Hooper's son, Tony. We drank a few bottles of wine at our Airbnb and watched an Italian DVD of *Night Terrors* (1993), which may be the strangest of Hooper's films. (For once, he was hired to replace a director who had been fired. Usually for Hooper, it was the other way around.) By chance, our Airbnb was just down the street from a house whose address we found in a letter to Hooper. Either he had lived there or received mail there in the *Chain Saw* days (fig. 0.1). We took some selfies in front of it. We visited I Luv Video, a famous Austin video rental institution recommended to us by a pleasant bartender. It was big, with a fantastic selection of films, but also a large selection of large dudes drinking beer and loudly debating the exact ways in which Quentin Tarantino was most amazing. America in twilight. We left quickly. More wine and editing of essays. The heat was intense, especially for two academics from cooler climes. We

Figure 0.1. Tobe Hooper lived (or at least received mail) here during the production of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. Photo taken by the editors during a research trip to Austin, Texas, July 2019.



marveled at the phenomenon of air-conditioning, which both makes the climate more bearable and hastens it toward cataclysm. On every walk to the cafe where we worked in the mornings, we saw the tower where Charles Whitman carried out his shooting spree in 1966. We had just enough time to go through Hooper's boxes and draft our next steps. Back home, Kristopher worked on leads that eventually led to our obtaining a digital copy of *The Song Is Love*.

PETER, PAUL AND MARY: THE SONG IS LOVE

Can we turn on the lights again? Can we turn on the lights again?!

PETER YARROW, *PETER, PAUL AND MARY: THE SONG IS LOVE*

According to Anne S. Lewis, an associate minister at the First Baptist Church of Austin in the late 1960s, the genesis of this documentary was a performance by Peter, Paul and Mary to which Lewis had taken a group of local high school students. Lewis asked whether she could make a short documentary to use for her youth groups, and the trio agreed. Lewis then called the only production company in town, Motion Picture Productions of Texas, of which Tobe Hooper

was part owner. Hooper, along with Ron and Lou Perryman, and Gary Pickle, began filming, and after a few months decided, with the writer-producer Fred Miller,¹ to make a longer documentary in the cinema verité style of D. A. Pennebaker and the Maysles brothers (Worley 1970). The hour-long feature documentary, shot and edited between 1968 and 1970, was picked up by PBS, which broadcast it sporadically over the next decade (Lewis 1999).²

Since then, it has been virtually unavailable.³ Some clips of the performances float around streaming platforms such as YouTube, but the full film has never been released on a home-video format. The saga of our search to see the film began with contacting the Toronto-based film programmer, writer, and producer David Bertrand, who, along with the director, writer, and producer Michael McNamara, made suggestions that ultimately led us through a string of film and music collectors and experts, including the music historian Ritchie Unterberger, the York University associate professor of musicology Rob Bowman, and the film collector Harry Guerro, who purportedly has the largest private collection of 35 mm prints in the United States. None had heard of the film.⁴ The search eventually led us to the Hooper cinephile and blogger Julius Banzon⁵ and to Hooper's friend and collaborator Stan Giese, who had access to a VHS copy of the film. After we obtained a digitized copy from Banzon and Giese, we found that far from being an anomaly, the documentary was crucial to understanding Hooper's technical and thematic development, and his role as a political artist.

It is easy now to elide Peter, Paul and Mary's radicalism amid the nostalgia for songs such as "Puff, the Magic Dragon."⁶ *The Song Is Love* captures Peter Yarrow speaking at a Memphis protest not long after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.⁷ "He had a dream," Yarrow says through the public-address system. "And he had started to forge that dream into a reality with love. . . . We shall honor him in death as we did in life by pledging ourselves to the realization of that dream." After footage of the Memphis protests, featuring armed police watching the predominantly Black and African American marchers, Hooper cuts to an antiwar march in Washington, DC, that features dramatic imagery of a group of protesters carrying coffins through the crowd—an echo of similar images in the opening of *Eggshells*. Mary Travers asks a young boy whether this is his first march. He says yes, and Mary nods, adding, "That's a good beginning." The resonance in 2020 is intense.

The Song Is Love, named after the 1967 song by the trio, is an inspired combination of political documentary and experimental portraiture, organized around personal statements by each band member. Mixing performance footage with candid interviews, musings by the band members in nature and backstage, and footage of the members marching and speaking at political rallies,

the film is a meditation on America's troubled politics, at home and abroad. Interviewed about the film, Hooper averred, "It's not a documentary, . . . and it's not necessarily ABOUT Peter, Paul and Mary, although they are featured in it" (quoted in Worley 1970).

Several candid moments serve as structuring set pieces, in which the three artists discuss freedom of artistic expression and the political limitations on that freedom. Hooper parallels these intimate statements with the band members' more public-facing protests for equal rights. In the earliest of these segments, Mary ponders her life as an artist:

Me, I'm me. . . . I feel sometimes terribly selfish because I have for a living something that is very total, and very beautiful, and I get to say all the things I want to say, and nobody stops me from saying them. And it's fun and it feels good. . . . It's a very total existence. And sometimes I feel sad that so many people don't have . . . that freedom in their life. That they are oppressed by their jobs, by their society, by the structure. That that beauty in them is constantly frustrated, and constantly turned inward and warped.

While Mary's positive vision of personal artistic expression, and what we might today call privilege, comes with a lamentation that not all Americans have opportunities to be so creatively fulfilled, Paul Stookey is even less optimistic about personal expression. Musing about his art on a boat in the middle of a community lake, he first echoes Mary's sentiments—"I kept thinking that what I was doing was just a natural extension of me"—then suddenly turns critical of the music industry: "It's so easy to fool yourself working with this material. . . . You try to be as real as you can onstage but you tend to forget the entire industry itself is not geared to that kind of realism." Hooper follows this with the group performing a song sung by Paul about the industry, "I Dig Rock and Roll Music"—in Paul's description, "a record about other records," which somewhat disparagingly name-drops the Mamas and the Papas, the Beatles, and Donovan in its plaintive sentiments: "I dig rock and roll music; / I could really get it on in that scene. / I think I could say somethin' if you know what I mean; / But if I really say it, the radio won't play it / Unless I lay it between the lines."

Such feelings about the freedom and power of art against the expectations of the industry seem portentously relevant to Hooper's own career, since the director was politically and artistically second-guessed at every turn. Though Hooper could not have predicted his future struggles inside and outside the Hollywood juggernaut, he fashioned a documentary that consciously blended the politics of freedom and equality with investigations of free artistic

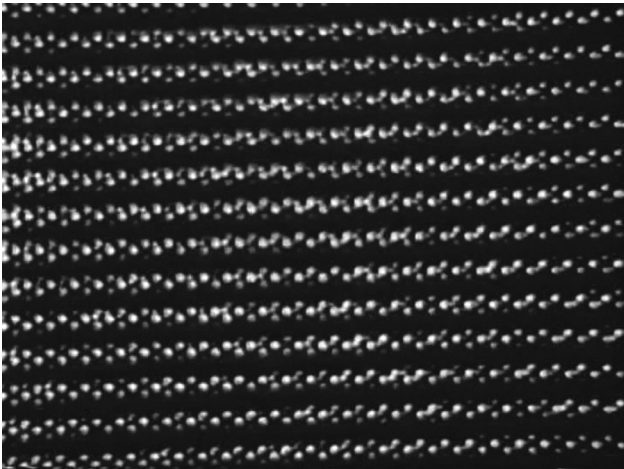
self-expression under stress. The way the three-part film begins with Mary's sentiments on the personal fulfillment of creative expression and then moves to harsher criticism through Paul's thoughts on the industry's conservatism and, later, Peter's wholesale takedown of all such musings on freedom as hopelessly naïve (discussed below) suggests at least one possible reason why Mary legally blocked the theatrical version of the film's wider release.⁸

The cinema verité-style interviews punctuated by footage of sound checks and live performances dramatically shifts halfway through the film, following the trio to Memphis and DC. Hooper suddenly interpolates distorted red, white, and blue images of marching soldiers, the concert audience, and Vietnamese prisoners during a live performance of "The Great Mandella (The Wheel of Life)" (figs. 0.2, 0.3, and 0.4.) Hypermediated imagery via TV screens becomes an almost painterly strategy here, conjuring an affect related not just to the subject matter but also to the television medium through which it comes into the realm of the spectator—a theme that Hooper revisited many times in his work.

The film's third act features scenes of Peter speaking to a group of youths. In the film's final moments, Peter questions his role as an artist and activist:

How can I dare to talk about your finding happiness when they are dying? And "they," who's "they"? Our boys? There is no "our boys" in Vietnam. We are all people, human beings, and when we can stop thinking about "our boys" and [start] thinking about the people being killed uselessly because this war is an anachronism and is not solving anything, then we start to not lie to ourselves. Well, even, how do I have the audacity? How dare I talk about your finding beauty and love while that's going on? Because, people, unless you have a vision of what it's going to be like, what it can be like, and what beauty is, all your energy devoted to feeling the horror of what is going on in the world, is useless.

It is tempting, again, to see such a critique as akin to Hooper's own. Hooper, discussing his role in this film, preferred the term "designer" to "director" (Worley 1970), a suggestion that his presence behind the film's arguments regarding art and politics was as great as or greater than that of his subjects. *The Song Is Love* ends with the lights of the concert venue going out unexpectedly—the second instance of this happening in the film—and with Peter's repeated call to "turn on the lights again." You can almost imagine Hooper, who struggled with many troubled productions, asking the same thing throughout his career as a politicized artist.



Figures 0.2,
0.3, and 0.4.
Hypermediated
imagery and
protesters
from *Peter, Paul
and Mary: The
Song Is Love*
(Tobe Hooper,
Trio Concerts
Incorporated,
1970, 1971).

"NO PLEASURE IN KILLING": CONSISTENT THEMES IN HOOPER

Tobe Hooper was born on January 25, 1943, in Austin, Texas, and died on August 26, 2017, his death preceded and arguably overshadowed by George A. Romero's death just a month prior.⁹ And while *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) will forever bring his name to mind, Hooper made seventeen other feature films—among them *The Funhouse* (1981), *Poltergeist* (1982), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986), *Spontaneous Combustion* (1990), and *Toolbox Murders* (2004)—and directed nearly as many projects for television. To date, scholarship devoted to Hooper's work aside from *Texas Chain Saw* is sparse. That film prompted one of the earliest scholarly essays not only on Hooper, but also on horror cinema more generally, "The Idea of Apocalypse in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*," by Christopher Sharrett (in Grant 1984). And Hooper's most influential film also features prominently in seminal work by Robin Wood (1979), Mikita Brottman (1997, 2005), Rick Worland (2007), and Adam Lowenstein (2016). Hooper's importance to horror cinema is widely acknowledged, though his importance to the advent and legitimation of horror scholarship may be easy to overlook, again in light of the focus on Romero's equally masterful *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), which had a massive impact on a developing field of horror studies.

Robin Wood has written that home and family lie at the center of American horror (1979, 122), and Hooper's work is a key example. In Hooper films, landscape and architecture are prominent as metaphors for fragile psychic and bodily states, but also as spatial manifestations of the darker, revelatory nature of a reality that must be inhabited and physically traversed to be experienced. Hooper's monstrous spaces, buildings, and houses are the "main attraction" in his films, as Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare puts it in his essay in this collection. Within them, Hooper visits upon the spectator themes linked to isolation, invasion, infection, decay, and degeneration, particularly with respect to what Bruce Kawin, referring to Hooper's *The Funhouse* (1981), calls the "degenerate family" (1981, 30). Hooper consistently finds horror and humor in the absurdities that lie at the center of the American family, in all its permutations, perversions, and subversions of the norm.¹⁰ Philip Brophy's oft-cited term for this reflexive combination of mimicry and mockery in contemporary horror—a kind of dialogue in direct address with the spectator—is "horrorality," which he defines as a conflation of "horror, textuality, morality, hilarity" (1986, 3). In Hooper's work, this concept is perhaps best crystallized in *Texas Chain Saw's* family dinner scene, with both its hosts and its victimized guest, Sally, staring directly out at one another and the spectator in, respectively, maniacal mockery and abject fear. The combination of horror and humor that Hooper often finds in such situations may have its origins in the horror films of James Whale,

particularly *The Old Dark House* (1932) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), two films featuring queer or queered “degenerate” families, which are often alluded to in Hooper’s work.¹¹ Though it may offer Hooper’s most sustained treatment of this theme, *Texas Chain Saw* is not the only film in his oeuvre to combine extreme dread and horror with a macabre humor. Later films such as *Eaten Alive* (1976), *The Funhouse*, *Poltergeist*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, *Spontaneous Combustion*, and *Mortuary* (2005) are infused with dark humor in their unsettling of America’s sacrosanct vision of family and nation.

The often unexpected and discomfiting nature of this darkly comical vein in Hooper’s work is a significant underpinning of his films’ hybridity. Another such factor is their pervasive intertextuality, which privileges theme and generic allusiveness over narrative logic or realism. As mentioned above, the early Universal Studios horror films—particularly those of James Whale—provide just some of the key intertexts for Hooper in films such as *The Funhouse*, *Salem’s Lot* (1979), and *Lifeforce* (1985). The presentation and undoing of what might be termed hysterical male power is a significant focus of all of Whale’s horror films, which include the two *Frankenstein* films (1931, 1935), *The Old Dark House*, and *The Invisible Man* (1933), with its tour de force performance of megalomania by Claude Rains. As Will Dodson argues in this collection, a similar investigation of male anxieties in an increasingly diversified America—claims of exceptionalism in its death throes—provides a major subversive thematic thread across Hooper’s work for film, television, and cable. Traditional masculinity under threat forms the crux of Dodson’s discussion and turns up even in the work that Hooper did for television series, undercutting the notion that he was a mere director for hire.

At the core of Hooper’s intertextuality is an interest in the spectatorial fascination with genre—hence, the many youthful characters in Hooper’s filmography who are monster kids or genre geeks. The preteens Joey Harper in *The Funhouse*, Robbie Freeling in *Poltergeist*, and David Gardner in *Invaders from Mars* (1986), along with the teenage Mark Petrie in *Salem’s Lot*, all have bedrooms that are shrines to horror and science fiction. Oddly, this youthful fascination with popular-culture genres extends to several of Hooper’s “monsters,” who display their own kind of monster fetishism in creating or donning objects of horror for display in their private spaces: *The Funhouse*’s carnival employee who wears a Frankenstein’s Monster mask, *Toolbox Murders*’ serial-killing Coffin Baby, and *Mortuary*’s demigod-worshipping Bobby Fowler are all cut from the same cloth in this respect. All three characters are gimp-like, neglected, and physically and mentally abnormal; all three sequester themselves in hidden interior spaces full of trinkets, keepsakes, and paraphernalia; and all three manifest the tragic childlike curiosity or vulnerability associated with Boris

Karloff's portrayal of the Monster in Whale's *Frankenstein* films. Leatherface is the Hooper prototype here, as nervous and nail-biting at times as he is manic and menacing. The consistent complexity of Hooper's monsters testifies to a sensitivity and an empathy in the director's work—an alignment with the alienated outsider that lies at the core of the horror genre.¹² That such sensitivity in Hooper has been elided by popular impressions of the director of *Texas Chain Saw* as a one-hit wonder at best, and a purveyor of lowbrow hokum at worst, is one of the central concerns of this book. In keeping with the deeply political nature of Hooper's work in forgotten films such as *The Song Is Love*, Hooper's consistent aesthetic sensibility was committed to exploring an America in constant crisis. His television episodes, for example—a body of work entirely excluded from extant Hooper scholarship—manifest these and other concerns that are endemic to Hooper's broader artistic vision.

HOOPER'S TV SERIES WORK

Director as Intertext As early as 1987, the year after his near-disastrous three-film contract with Golan-Globus / Cannon Films ended, Hooper embarked on what would be a long and relatively fraught relationship with television. As Brigid Cherry notes in this collection, the name “Tobe Hooper” had become synonymous in both critical and popular discourses with extreme gore and violence, based primarily on the reputation of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, a dread film that deftly implies, though rarely shows, violence to the body. But impressions of Hooper dominated, despite the reality of the work he produced.¹³ Hooper's involvement in some of his television work suggested the director had become a kind of intertext—one whose presence alone could “brand” a series as darkly sci-fi or horror inflected, adding a touch of the edgy, exploitative, or excessive to what in many cases was fairly standard, even mainstream fare.

Consider, for example, the ninety-minute pilots Hooper directed for two alien-abduction conspiracy series: *Dark Skies* (1997) and *Taken* (2002). “The Awakening,” the pilot for the earlier, edgier, short-lived *Dark Skies*, set largely in Washington, DC, focuses on governmental cover-ups and manipulation of the public; and though not as assured or compelling as its prototype, *The X-Files* (1993–2002, 2016–2018), the two-part episode's atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion fit squarely with Hooper's political sensibility. The slick Steven Spielberg–produced miniseries *Taken*, an odd (and troubled) combination of wistful 1940s nostalgia and governmental conspiracy, was a less likely fit. As with *Dark Skies*, Hooper directed only the pilot for this sprawling, multicharacter production, which was similar in scale to Hooper's earlier *Salem's Lot* but, unlike that project, tonally and thematically uneven in its combination

of sci-fi and soap-operatic historical melodrama. The intertextual aspect of Hooper's selection as director for either series may thus have related less to his horror credentials than to his critical "presence" behind the camera. In other words, Hooper's creative involvement (or even just his name after "Directed by") suggested that a certain skepticism around American institutions could be assumed to mark the series. This implicit Hooper subversiveness was critical in the case of a series such as *Taken*, which wavered between a kind of patriotic awe and respectful skepticism in its presentation of the military as a monolithic dark force at the center of the series, its ostensible mission to protect and to serve the American public compromised by shady dealings, internal corruption, and damaging secrecy. Whereas it might be hard to find the dull edge of *Taken's* critique, Hooper's direction of its pilot, "Beyond the Sky," frames at least one scene with the shock of the unexpected, loaded with the sense of political portent familiar from his work. In that scene, a military officer dispassionately bashes in the head of his romantic partner to prevent her from exposing his corrupt ascent in the ranks.

That much of Hooper's TV work has gone uncommented on may have to do with the director's incredible versatility. Hooper directed seventeen episodes for fourteen television series over the span of twenty years, ending with his two bleak and relatively gruesome episodes for the producer Mick Garris's *Masters of Horror* (2005–2007), "Dance of the Dead" in 2005 and "The Damned Thing" in 2006. His earliest forays into television were the politically radical aforementioned *Peter, Paul and Mary: The Song Is Love* and his zombie-uprising music video for Billy Idol's "Dancing with Myself," which first aired in 1983 on the newly formed MTV. The latter, as Jerry Metz argues in this collection, was the first of its kind and would be key to defining the music-video aesthetic for that decade. Hooper made his American major network-television debut with *Salem's Lot* (1979) for CBS, but wouldn't return to the networks until nearly ten years later for the final episode of Spielberg's uneven anthology series *Amazing Stories* (NBC, 1985–1987), with "Miss Stardust," a zany, excessive, satirical mash-up of 1940s detective film, alien-invasion narrative (with a head alien played by "Weird Al" Yankovic), and reality-TV talent show. And in the twenty-year period that stretched from that effort to his *Masters of Horror* episodes, Hooper explored a variety of genres and styles, including the gritty inner-city documentary style of "No Place Like Home," his well-received episode for *The Equalizer* (1985–1989); kitschy pseudodocumentary work for the series *Haunted Lives: True Ghost Stories* (1991–1992; aka *Real Ghosts*, 1995–1996); the decidedly dark entries he made for *Freddy's Nightmares* (1988–1990), *Nowhere Man* (1995–1996), and *Night Visions* (2001–2002); and the parodic,

comical excesses of his work for *Tales from the Crypt* (1989–1996) and *Perversions of Science* (1997).

Despite the diversity of subject matter and tone in his television output, the major aesthetic and thematic trends in Hooper's work are visible throughout. These include commentary on the media and mainstream entertainment (and implicitly on Spielberg), a documentary sensibility that brings a stark realism to certain episodes, a deft use of space and architecture to generate dread, and a critical investment in subverting the underpinnings of capitalism and neoliberalism.

TV on TV: Hooper on the Medium Hooper revisited *Poltergeist*'s use of the TV set as both a portal and a site of critique rather playfully in *Invaders from Mars* when its young protagonist, David Gardner, comes home to a television tuned to static and switches instead to a channel showing Hooper's *Lifeforce*; the moment sees Hooper perhaps wryly distancing himself from the Hollywood blockbuster film that *Poltergeist* represents, while also, as Ian Olney points out in this collection, admitting his own associations with it (see also Latham 1995). Hooper revisits the evil-TV trope once again, and far more sinisterly, in the middle segment of the episode he directed for the CBS series *Haunted Lives*. In "Legend of Kate Morgan," a lawyer obsessed with the infamous suicide in a hotel of a young woman in the past sees an image of her eyes and mouth on an otherwise blackened TV screen when he occupies the same room.¹⁴ The scene is chilling, recalling Joan Hawkins's allusion in this collection to Jeffrey Sconce's work on the televisual medium's effectively uncanny presence as a kind of "sentient being, and a gateway to an electronic unreality" (Sconce 2000, 164). Hooper's media skepticism receives another, more playful nod in "Panic," his episode for the HBO cable series *Perversions of Science* (1997). A revisiting of the *War of the Worlds* hoax, "Panic" turns the tables on the Wellesian/Wellsonian radio broadcast's deception of the general public, effectively weaponizing the hoax to deceive and lure two Martian invaders to their demise. As J. Shea and Ned Schantz argue in this collection, Hooper's interest in media hoaxing appears as early as the opening title scrawl and radio-news soundtrack in *Texas Chain Saw*, which announce a world on the brink of social and political chaos and degeneration, suggesting a film both based on and documenting incidents ripped from such headlines. Rounding out this aspect of Hooper's media critique is the aforementioned "Miss Stardust," Hooper's episode of *Amazing Stories*. Airing one year after *Invaders from Mars* (and featuring a mom played by Laraine Newman and a military leader played by James Karen), "Miss Stardust" is another alien-invasion tale. Yet the aliens arrive solely to compete in an

American Idol-esque singing contest that forms the bulk of the episode, with a combination of absurdity and increasing discomfort (not always the good kind) in the “musical” performances by Miss Jupiter, Miss Venus, and Miss Mars (all alien creatures designed by Stan Winston, apparently under severe budgetary and time constraints). James Karen’s corporate-media mogul here is similar to his role as a real estate tycoon in *Poltergeist*, and the episode also stars *Texas Chain Saw*’s Jim Siedow as the unlikeliest of contest judges.

“Property of the People, Not For Sale”: Uncanny Space and Neoliberal Critique

Much is made in this collection of Tobe Hooper’s deployment of uncanny space and architecture as a method of unsettling critique. From the more overt references to the Gothic Old Dark House trope in films such as *Texas Chain Saw*, *Eaten Alive*, and *Salem’s Lot* to the abject pasts and unsettled histories in *Poltergeist*, *The Apartment Complex* (1999), *Toolbox Murders* (2004), and *Djinn* (2013), the director maintained a career-long focus on the radical politics of shifting, corruptible, revelatory space. Hooper’s TV work offers several compelling examples of a concern with the social, psychological, and political implications of space. “Souls on Board,” for example, an episode he directed for the paranormal-investigation series *The Others* (2000), revisits *The Twilight Zone*’s “Nightmare at 20,000 Feet” (Richard Donner, 1963) for a locked-room haunting limited to the claustrophobic space of a doomed airliner; windows function as screens, and entertainment channels as portals, for spectral manifestations acting as harbingers. Hooper keeps the camera moving as much as possible among the passengers to suggest space that has been compromised, destabilized; and the episode’s opening is a tour de force of limited perspective as the camera creeps over a flight control board accompanied by radio communication with a doomed flight, revealing only moments later that we are not in a cockpit at all, but with a team of investigators listening in on a black box flight recorder recounting a prior disaster.

In “The Maze” and “Cargo,” the two segments he made for the Henry Rollins-hosted anthology series *Night Visions*, Hooper generates increasing dread from uncanny architectural space. “Cargo,” like the claustrophobic “Souls on Board,” is limited almost entirely to the cargo hold of a ship. Shadows and the spectacle of suggestion dominate in this likely homage to Val Lewton’s *The Ghost Ship* (Mark Robson, 1943), the camera constantly tracking in and out and canting from side to side uneasily to suggest queasiness and instability without resorting to the clichéd this-way-that-way camera tilting familiar to viewers of *Star Trek* (1966–1969). In the segment “The Maze,”¹⁵ Hooper induces a pervasive sense of dread via his use of the brutalist architecture of Vancouver’s Simon Fraser University. Solely through camera placement and movement, the

segment creates a vast sense of emptiness and paranoia for its main character, Susan Thornhill, who wanders through an on-campus maze into a doomsday scenario reminiscent of *The Twilight Zone*'s pilot episode, "Where Is Everybody?" (Robert Stevens, 1959).

The more realistic "No Place Like Home," Hooper's episode for the third season of CBS's *Equalizer* (March 16, 1988), brings these notions of paranoid space more straightforwardly into the political realm. The episode is framed by two structures: the decrepit Alexandria Hotel, serving as tenement housing, and the reconstituted space of a collective housing project at episode's end. Opening with a compelling documentary-style sequence showing New York City's overwhelming number of homeless and disenfranchised residents, the episode centers on a family evicted from their apartment and forced to live in the gruesome squalor of the Alexandria, where corrupt landlords terrorize the tenants and extort the city's rental subsidies from them. The dejection of the community and the dilapidated state of the space makes this episode easily the most abject work Hooper did for television other than his two *Masters of Horror* episodes. Against this tapestry, the former spy turned private detective and vigilante advocate Robert McCall helps the family find a home in the aforementioned collective housing project, which displays a sign reading "Property of the people. Not for sale!" and exposes the broader corruption in the city's housing market with the eventual help of a documentary team interested in the Alexandria's history. Tied to this political subtext is a subversive critique of neoliberal individualism and dominant notions of masculinity. The father, played by the handsome and tough Michael Rooker, is repeatedly put down by his adolescent son for being a failure and a "loser." But the episode takes pains to dismantle this masculinist-individualist ideology, as when the boy's mother responds to his claim that at school they are encouraged to rely only on themselves: "Sometimes factories close and people lose their jobs." And McCall laments to his partner, who shares similar views of the father as an American breadwinner who just needs to pull himself up by his bootstraps and take control of his life, "Families who end up on the street! This country has changed somewhat. Just look around you!"

A similar investigation of American male agency collapsing under the weight of neoliberal ideology occurs in Hooper's pilot, "Absolute Zero," and the follow-up episode, "Turnabout," for the series *Nowhere Man*. The photographer Thomas Veil loses his entire life—wife, home, career, identity—because of the provocative content of one of his radical antiwar photographs. The episode takes one of America's exceptionalist ideals—total mobility—to a disturbing extreme, leaving Thomas (in a Gothic trope usually reserved for women) with no fixed address or identity, a specter who must move from space to space in

search of what has been stripped from him. As a fellow victim tells him, “You don’t have any friends. Everything they give you they can take back. Everything you thought you had, you don’t. Absolute zero, gentle Jack. Bottom line.” The pilot ends with a beautiful, alienating final shot of Thomas standing in the middle of nowhere at a rural crossroads, an image that evokes Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* (1959). In an interview, the show’s creator, Lawrence Hertzog, explains that the series was produced under time constraints that left him without a clear series arc; thus, each episode of the series would be uniquely self-contained. Hooper directed the first two episodes because they were the only two that directly related to each other, and Hertzog acknowledges that Hooper’s vision was largely responsible for the series’ darkly melancholic tone and aesthetic (Hertzog, Greenwood, Dunne).

Examples of Hooper’s television work that receive more significant coverage in this collection are “Eye,” Hooper’s segment for John Carpenter’s *Body Bags* (1993); “No More Mr. Nice Guy,” the pilot for *Freddy’s Nightmares* (1988–1990); “Dead Wait,” from *Tales from the Crypt* (1989–1996); and the *Masters of Horror* (2005–2007) episodes “Dance of the Dead” and “The Damned Thing.”¹⁶ This segment of our introduction, by no means definitive, is meant to encourage further work on Hooper’s unsung impact on genre television.

THE TROLL VIRUS: MIDNIGHT MOVIE

Hooper’s novel *Midnight Movie* was published in 2011 to little fanfare, as was the bulk of his television and late-period work. Cowritten with Alan Goldsher, the experimental narrative is composed of a series of fictional interviews, newspaper and magazine articles, tweets, blog posts, Blackberry messages, emails, advertisements, and first-person monologues by a large cast of characters, including a gruff underemployed filmmaker named Tobe Hooper.¹⁷ The plot concerns the discovery of a “lost” film that Hooper made as a teenager, *Destiny Express*. Hooper receives an invitation to a screening of the film at the South by Southwest Film Festival by a strange curator named Dude McGee.¹⁸ The film somehow infects the audience with a “virus” that unleashes the id’s urges for violence and sex. The virus transmutes into some sort of sexually transmitted infection, with symptoms including zombification, wanton sexual lust and brutality, and physical disappearance during REM sleep. Erick Laughlin, a local Austin journalist-musician (and lead guitarist for a Hooper-influenced band called *Massacre This*), covers the screening and eventually meets up with Hooper. Together with Erick’s new love interest, Janine Daltry, they try to figure out what is happening, why, and how to stop it. The creeping viral apocalypse,

called by McGee “The Game,” spreads nationally, but happens so slowly that few notice until the streets teem with zombies.

This Internet-age epistolary novel is most interesting as a mash-up of the common tropes of Hooper’s contemporaries in the 1970s generation of horror filmmakers. *Midnight Movie* features zombies (George A. Romero), venereal body horror (David Cronenberg), and dream states (Wes Craven), along with a pseudo-Hawksian male duo of dubious competency and a tough-talking woman as the “heroes” (John Carpenter). The idea of a film causing a pandemic (shades of Carpenter’s 2005 “Cigarette Burns” entry for the *Masters of Horror* series) connects a line backward from the virality of new media to larger concerns about cinema’s propagandistic effects, which have persisted since the medium’s birth. Further, it somewhat presciently outlines the nascent “troll” culture of the Internet: just as contagion via the film erupts into mayhem in the streets, online snark can quickly escalate into actual violence. The real-world events of the near decade since *Midnight Movie*’s publication would seem to confirm the real power of media “virality.”

The novel’s interest in all sorts of media dissemination perhaps confirms that Hooper’s continual focus on themes of communication and mediation reveals a concentrated focus on how audiences might be affected by visual and other media. From the experimental hypermediation and editing in his earlier work, to an emphasis on the presence of the camera in space, to an investigation of how spaces and surfaces can be made to reveal hidden or suppressed violence, Hooper’s interest in the ways we communicate has always been deeply cinematic, even synesthetic. The novel indulges in some straightforward self-reflexivity, too. By inserting Hooper himself into the novel’s narrative, the two authors seem to be looking at his place within the history of cinema and TV production. In perhaps the most telling running joke in the book, after “The Game” begins to spread, the character Hooper spends much of the remaining novel working on a screenplay and trying to raise money to produce *Destiny Express Redux*, a “reimagining” that he hopes will counter the effects of the original.

COLLECTING HOOPER

The essays in this collection represent the first comprehensive scholarly study in English of Tobe Hooper’s career. Significantly, it is the first study to explore Hooper’s filmography in depth without focusing on *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, though that film’s critical and commercial shadow looms large. Our fundamental goal is to open critical consideration of Hooper beyond the easy

and all-too-common dismissal of most of his post-*Chain Saw* work and to understand him as an auteur with consistent thematic interests. Current scholarship on Hooper includes few sustained takes on the director's body of work. Key examples include Fabio Zanello's 2001 Italian-language *Il cinema di Tobe Hooper*; James Rose's 2013 *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*; John Kenneth Muir's 2002 *Eaten Alive at a Chainsaw Massacre: Tobe Hooper's Films*;¹⁹ Tony Earnshaw's 2014 *Tobe Hooper's "Salem's Lot": Studies in the Horror Film*, featuring a collection of interviews with the production team, actors, and crew; Soraia di Fazio's 2015 Italian-language *The Texas chainsaw massacre di Tobe Hooper: La famiglia, il falso documentarismo e i rimandi intertestuali*; and Dominique Legrand's 2017 French-language *Les Territoires interdits de Tobe Hooper*. The latest is Joseph Lanza's "cultural history" *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre: The Film That Terrified a Rattled Nation* (2019). *American Twilight: The Cinema of Tobe Hooper* joins these studies, bringing the first sustained look at the director's work through a wide array of theoretical approaches.

We have divided this volume into four broadly themed sections. The essays in each section, however, often explore themes relevant to other sections and make references both deliberate and coincidental to one another. The appendix, "Cross-Referenced Tobe Hooper Filmography," lists Hooper's film and television works chronologically, collecting pertinent production information and identifying the chapters in which those works receive significant coverage.

The first six chapters follow a common thread of Hooper's Gothic influences and inclinations. Brigid Cherry begins by identifying a hybrid aesthetic that distinguishes the director's work from what was perceived as typical genre fare in the 1980s. This distinction is important for seeing Hooper's cinema apart from reductive categories—such as the supposed break from past traditions represented by 1980s horror—and reveals his work to be in inter- and metatextual conversation with earlier Gothic horror cinema such as Universal's classic monster movies and Hammer films of the 1950s and 1960s. Joan Hawkins provides a fresh perspective on *Poltergeist* that illustrates ways Hooper's aesthetics work with and against those of producer Steven Spielberg to produce a darker take on suburban cultural and economic breakdown than can be found in Spielberg's work. Here and elsewhere, Hooper's Gothic fantasies often depict young protagonists finding the secure foundations of their families and communities disrupted and compromised, and Kristopher Woofter explores some of the consequences of their disillusionment in the face of monstrous revelations, from uncanny to abject to Weird in the films *The Funhouse*, *Invaders from Mars*, and the little-discussed late work *Mortuary*. Woofter ties these films to a wider tradition of youth horror, calling for further investigation of Hooper's focus on the child's perspective. Building on this sense of disillusionment,

Tony Williams notes elements of lurid melodrama and Hitchcockian suspicion in *Salem's Lot*, along with what he calls a residual "counterculture fatigue" evident in *Eggshells* and underlying the town's response to the Old World evil of the invading vampires.

The uncanny Gothic of both industrial and domestic space pervades Hooper's cinema, and in the first of two essays on *The Mangler* (1995), Carl H. Sederholm recontextualizes this widely derided film as an extended, incisive critique of late capitalism in America, symbolized foremost in the industrial production of the Mangler itself. For Sederholm, the film's excesses yield a plangent critique, particularly of the effects of the late-capitalist machine on women, placing the film within an American Gothic literary tradition stretching back at least as far as Herman Melville's similarly anti-industrialization short story "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (1855). Anne Golden and Kristopher Woofert trace seemingly more traditional Gothic "unsettled" spaces in Hooper's "living" structures throughout his career, from the early experimental city-symphony film *Down Friday Street* (1966) to the later *Toolbox Murders* and Hooper's final film, *Djinn*. The authors also note the carryover of Hooper's avant-garde techniques in the earliest of these films to a broader aesthetic sensibility that destabilizes space, borrowing from (and highlighting) the Gothic tradition's inherent politics of suspicion.

From unsettled structures to traumatized bodies, the second section's five chapters take innovative approaches to the theme of embodiment. Adam Lowenstein highlights ways that Hooper persistently confronts viewers with distorted images of old age, reminders of our collective fear of aging, and attempts to obscure and ignore both aging and old age. The "funhouse mirror" that Lowenstein invokes through age theory's focus on our fear of aging bodies finds new contexts in Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare's meditation on avant-garde filmmaking and "cinemasochism" (MacCormack 2010) in Hooper's first feature, *Eggshells*. In DeGiglio-Bellemare's postrepresentational analysis, Hooper creates an experimental, boundary-crossing spectatorial experience that exists not to be teleologically "decoded" but to be sensorially "experienced." Eggs—crocodile eggs, that is—play an important role in Mike Thorn's discussion of two of Hooper's more maligned films, *Eaten Alive* and *Crocodile* (2000). Thorn applies triune brain theory to argue that Hooper's films stand against human exceptionalism, with implications germane to social and environmental sustainability.

Many hierarchical, unsustainable behaviors stem from historical patriarchies, a primary source of human exceptionalism. Another important, related theme that runs throughout Hooper's fifty-year filmography is masculine anxiety and despair. As Will Dodson's essay argues, crumbling economic and social

positions for traditional masculine roles and sanctioned violence leave confused, enraged, maldeveloped men lashing out as they attempt to reassert their dominant roles. The increasing number and influence of strongman dictators around the world, including the United States, is a troubling indication that these men have not yet seen their last days. Exceptionalism continues to trouble the body in Alanna Thain's essay on *Spontaneous Combustion* (1990), one of Hooper's most ambitious and most compromised projects. Thain explores the literal impact of the nuclear "family" on the body of a hapless youth, and the implications of Hooper's film as a commentary on the nuclear age—not future, but present, now.

The production history of many of Hooper's films has been the stuff of legend, and the films themselves have offered both direct and oblique examinations of filmmaking and Hollywood. The third grouping of five chapters centers on both contextual and thematic considerations of film production and history. Ian Olney reconsiders the three films Hooper made for Cannon Films in the mid-1980s—*Lifeforce*, *Invaders from Mars*, and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*—as metacommentaries on classic horror and science fiction and satires of the Reagan era. Moving specifically to the luridness and lore of Hollywood, Nina K. Martin positions Hooper's in-name-only remake of *The Toolbox Murders* (Dennis Donnelly, 1978) as a film steeped in Hollywood history and in the adjacent occult and true-crime history of Los Angeles.²⁰

Hollywood's history and the multifaceted nature of celebrity, consumerism, and spectacle inform Jerry Metz's essay on two productions that bookend Hooper's career: the music video for Billy Idol's song "Dancing with Myself," and "Dance of the Dead," an episode in the first season of Mick Garris's Showtime series *Masters of Horror*. In between these two television productions, Hooper spent a great deal of the late 1980s and the 1990s working in the medium, as we discuss above. John Paul Taylor pays particular attention to Hooper's made-for-television movies as abject, both for being seen in critical and popular discourse as "cast-off" projects, and for exploring Gothic themes of repressed pasts reemerging to "infect" the present. For Taylor, *I'm Dangerous Tonight* (1990), *Night Terrors* (1993), and *The Apartment Complex* (1999) are typical of Hooper's more celebrated work and are worth reconsidering for their evocations of sublimely embodied, monstrous histories. As abject a production as there ever was, *The Mangler* returns in Clayton Dillard's essay, which positions the film as a reflexive introspection on the "Hollywood Industrial Complex"—a machine that ritually chews up and spits out the victims who serve it—and Hooper's own marginal status as a director.

Hollywood may have marginalized Tobe Hooper from the mainstream success enjoyed by his contemporaries in the horror genre, but Hooper

nevertheless was an auteur with a singular vision and consistent themes. Foremost among those themes is an America in decline and crisis, full of repressed and abjected darkness. Accordingly, we pair our concluding essays under the heading “The American Twilight.” J. Shea and Ned Schantz reinforce the case for Hooper as an auteur, and for his fundamental themes, in their explication of the opening sequence of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. This close reading and spectator response suggests that Hooper’s entire career was in fact announced by and encapsulated within his most famous and respected film, which certainly presented an apocalyptic vision of America. *American Twilight*, the title of this volume, was suggested by Christopher Sharrett’s final chapter, and he generously allowed us to use it for this collection. A companion piece to his 2017 essay for *Film International*, Sharrett’s chapter offers an appreciation and a eulogy for a filmmaker whose vast impact on global cinema overshadowed his career.

NOTES

1. Anne Lewis’s (1999) time line is a bit incomplete. She dates the Peter, Paul and Mary performance to March 20, 1969, but notes that Miller had been producing and writing what would become *The Song Is Love* since sometime in 1968.

2. In a letter dated May 29, 1973, from Warren Skaaren to Norman (no last name) in support of Tobe Hooper, Skaaren mentions that the documentary was “the highest-rated program on PBS” at the time of writing (Tobe Hooper Papers, Harry Ransom Center University of Texas at Austin; hereafter cited as Tobe Hooper Papers).

3. In the same May 29, 1973, letter, Skaaren writes that the “90 minute theatrical version of that film had distribution through United Artists, but Mary filed a ‘super lawsuit’ against Peter and Paul and her settlement included the banning of the film for theatrical distribution” (Tobe Hooper Papers).

4. In a personal email from August 29, 2019, Guerro writes, “It is highly doubtful that you will ever find a print of this [in] any collector [*sic*] hands. I’m a huge Hooper fan but have never even heard of it.”

5. Banzon is also curator of *The Tobe Hooper Appreciation Society* blog (<http://cranialblowout.blogspot.com>), an incredible resource for context and insight into Hooper’s work. Recent posts on the site include a rough cut of *Invaders from Mars*, with an opening act that was excised from the film (November 20, 2019), and “It’s Nighttime,” an early treatment of *Poltergeist* by Hooper and Steven Spielberg (August 14, 2018).

6. It is worth remembering that then-vice president Spiro Agnew included “Puff the Magic Dragon” in the list of “drug songs” that he wanted banned from the radio.

7. In a poignant moment before the speech, Hooper captures silent footage of Yarrow offering a cigarette to a Black man and then lighting it for him.

8. Skaaren to Norman, May 29, 1973, Tobe Hooper Papers. The band broke up in 1970, before the release of *The Song Is Love*, though they reunited occasionally throughout the 1970s to support George McGovern’s campaign and protests against, for example, the development of nuclear energy.

9. The phrase “no pleasure in killing” in the heading for this section comes from a scene in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* when the oldest brother, nearly upstaged by the absurd dinner party over which he presides, says, “Nah, I don’t take no pleasure in killing.” This ironic sentiment underscores the critical and aesthetic principle of Tobe Hooper’s body of work.

10. In an interview for *Fangoria*, Hooper stated, “I have this strong desire to make comedies . . . Most of my horror films have comedic elements to them, and it would be nice to do a film like *Young Frankenstein*” (Nutman 1988, 36). Even the grimmest of Hooper’s films include a good deal of humor.

11. The masterly, bizarre family dinner scene in Whale’s *Old Dark House* may be the ur-source of absurdist family horror in American cinema. As Brigid Cherry and Tony Williams note in this collection, Hooper seems to have noticed.

12. Hooper’s tendency toward meta-casting offers yet another, often playful inter-textual element. Louise Fletcher’s casting as the strict disciplinarian schoolteacher in *Invaders from Mars* is meant in part to evoke her Oscar-winning turn as Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (Milos Forman, 1975), just as the casting of Elisha Cook Jr. and Marie Windsor in *Salem’s Lot* evokes the ill-fated, scheming couple in *The Killing* (Stanley Kubrick, 1957), and the casting of André De Toth (director of the 3-D horror film *House of Wax*, 1953) and John Landis (director of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* [1982] and *American Werewolf in London* [1981]) lends a certain gimmicky whimsicality to *Spontaneous Combustion*.

13. On rare but notable occasions, such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* and his episodes for *Tales from the Crypt* and *Masters of Horror*, Hooper did depict extreme gore. The rarity of gore is as notable as the gore itself, given the prevailing trends of the time.

14. The segment is part of a three-segment episode that Hooper directed for this fairly standard pseudodocumentary series (later retitled *Real Ghosts* for airing on UPN), with a few quirky touches. In the opening segment, “Ghosts R Us,” a guy accidentally buries an axe in his shin out of rage and frustration over unrequited love and ends up haunting a Toys “R” Us store; and in the more sedate third segment, “School Spirit,” an abandoned school’s ghost children won’t let the building be torn down by a construction crew. Hooper is credited (along with Jonathan Moser) with the creation of the episode’s special visual effects.

15. This segment also aired the same year on the Fox Network as part of the anthology film *Shadow Realm*; see Appendix: Cross-Referenced Tobe Hooper Filmography.

16. Hooper’s pilot for the 1998 series *Prey*, titled “Hungry for Survival,” never aired and has not been made available; see Appendix: Cross-Referenced Tobe Hooper Filmography.

17. Goldsher, a freelance writer, novelist, and musician, also cowrote Robert England’s 2009 memoir, *Hollywood Monster*, for which Hooper wrote a foreword.

18. Dude McGee is graphically described as morbidly obese and hygienically challenged as well as inappropriately familiar with people, particularly women. It is an uncomfortable caricature of the Austin film- and geek-culture fixture Harry Knowles, founder of the influential website, Ain’t It Cool News. (Erick compares Dude McGee to Knowles in the novel, as though to put some distance between the two, but McGee is clearly based on Knowles.) Knowles took a leave of absence from the site in 2017 after multiple women came forward with allegations of sexual harassment. It is impossible

to know whether Hooper was aware of Knowles's behavior or reputation for such behavior, but the two certainly crossed paths many times in the Austin film scene.

19. The frequency of references in this volume to Muir's critical survey of Hooper's work attests to its significance as a comprehensive introduction.

20. Hooper's 2004 film omits "The" from the title, and excises the entire plot except the killer's predilection for hand tools.

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HOOPER'S GOTHIC

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“IT’S BETTER TO BE SUGGESTIVE”

Gothic Intertextuality and Hybridity in the
1980s Films of Tobe Hooper

BRIGID CHERRY

AS THE FAN-CRITIC PATRICK BROMLEY (2018) writes, Tobe Hooper “knows damn well how to make an insanely violent movie.” Hooper, of course, is particularly known—and highly regarded—in horror fandom for his “insanely violent” films. By the start of the 1980s, he was being popularly recognized for the film sometimes referred to, although this is a highly debatable claim, as the progenitor of the slasher era, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), and for the similarly violent and visceral style of *Eaten Alive* (1976). With films such as *The Funhouse* (1981) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986), this reputation became firmly established in fan discourses. Hooper’s oeuvre, though, is not one that singularly privileges explicit violence; in fact, this is seen in the restraint of the aesthetics he employs in depictions of violent acts in his early films. Further, he employs a predominantly suggestive and atmospheric style in several of the films and television programs he directed alongside the aforementioned titles, including *Salem’s Lot* (1979), *Poltergeist* (1982), and *Invaders from Mars* (1986). Hooper is often quoted as saying, “I don’t believe in using too much graphic violence, although I’ve done it. It’s better to be suggestive and to allow the viewer to fill in the blanks with their minds” (Evanson 2018). Although Hooper’s comment is intended to convey how he implies violence rather than depicts it explicitly, it can be applied also to the way his films often foreground horror tropes that depend on suggestive or uncanny modes of affect. Most significantly, the ways in which he directly refers to earlier horror cycles in his films (particularly the Universal Gothic film tradition) suggest that any straightforward categorization of his filmic style and approach is problematic. Certainly, critics might consider Hooper—as fan discourses often do—a postmodern horror filmmaker of the post-1970s cycle of explicit violence and gore (though Hooper’s films are far less predicated on gore, or body horror, aesthetics than are those of his contemporaries George Romero and David

Cronenberg). But it is important in any consideration of Hooper to credit the ways his films acknowledge and appropriate heterogeneous modes of horror.

Examining Hooper's use of a hybridized aesthetic, primarily through the connections he draws to earlier cycles of Gothic horror cinema, repositions Hooper's films in a continuum with the past, as opposed to histories claiming that 1980s horror represented a distinct break in horror cinema. Such an approach illustrates Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Erin Mercer's (2014) point about the aesthetic and conceptual interconnections between traditional Gothic and horror cinema. Such interconnections found in Hooper's films suggest a "Gothicized" mode. This term is primarily used to indicate the set of Gothic intertexts, allusions, and tropes with which Hooper worked, especially where these were organized around depictions of the family and the home. Taking in an analysis of *The Funhouse*, *Invaders from Mars*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, *Lifeorce*, the *Freddy's Nightmares* episode "No More Mr. Nice Guy" (1988), and the TV movie *I'm Dangerous Tonight* (1990), this inquiry considers Gothic horror as intertext and metatext to counterpoint and comment on the more explicit aesthetic typical of 1980s horror.

CRITICAL MISCONCEPTIONS OF 1980S HORROR

This discussion focuses predominantly on Hooper's films of the 1980s, not least because 1980s horror cinema is often depicted in horror-fan discourse and journalism as a body of work in which gore and explicit effects were in ascendance. The slasher film and various strains of body horror, gore, and splatter cinema were privileged in publications such as *Fangoria*, which showcased practical effects, makeup, and other film technologies (Kendrick 2014, 310). While there are examples of supernatural and Gothic horror from this period—films such as *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), *The Lost Boys* (Joel Schumacher, 1987), and *Beetlejuice* (Tim Burton, 1988)—the dominant discourse foregrounded violent assaults on human flesh, the opening up or transformation of the body, and the explicit gory imagery depicting such subject matter. Kelly Hurley, for example, describes the critical consensus of 1970s and 1980s horror as "manifesting a more lurid sensationalism" with "ever more disgusting content," "ever more sadistic violence," "ever more graphic, painstakingly rendered corporeal transformations," and "ever more grotesque and unspeakable embodiments," and she cites Tobe Hooper among the horror filmmakers known for this style (1995, 203–204).

This misconception of Hooper's films (which, as outlined above, are more suggestive than explicit in their representation of violence and rarely predicated

on gore) renders it all the more important to reconsider his work from this period. James Kendrick also unites 1980s horror films according to this dominant aesthetic: “All of them were bound together by a newly intensified emphasis on make-up special effects and explicit gore” (2014, 313). He locates a binary opposition between “subtle horrors” (which were “out”) and “body horror” (“in”). Looked at in this respect, it might be extrapolated that body horror and subtle horror work on oppositional (or at least divergent) modes. Furthermore, the fan-scholar John McCarty suggests that splatter horror films’ visceral impact “aim[s] not to scare their audiences, necessarily, nor drive them to the edges of their seats in suspense, but to mortify them with scenes of explicit gore” (1984, 1).

These reductive arguments elide the heterogeneous modes of affect (which can include sublime dread or terror) that might be found at play in gore films, and overlook the supernatural and Gothic cinema of the time, including Hooper’s *Poltergeist*. Indeed, as Kendrick (2017, 318) rightly recognizes, 1980s slashers often contain supernatural elements. It is not unusual for gore films of the 1980s to incorporate the uncanny, the spectral, and Gothic modes—as I explored in relation to adaptations of the work of Clive Barker (2017). Such modes also play a significant part in Hooper’s films of this period, contributing to the overall horror aesthetic and creating meaning or modes of emotional affect that hold an appeal beyond the mortification that McCarty describes. Hooper’s films of the 1980s are therefore an apt case study of such hybridity and the continued importance of earlier Gothic horror cinema through this period.

THE UNIVERSAL HORROR INTERTEXT

A significant component of Hooper’s Gothicized aesthetic are his visual references to classic horror cinema, specifically the Universal film versions of *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931), *The Mummy* (Karl Freund, 1932), *The Wolf Man* (George Waggner, 1941), and other classic monsters. This is most overt in the opening sequence of *The Funhouse*. The film opens with a series of shots moving around a child’s bedroom. The camera focuses on a carnival poster of a fat lady (a bridge from the title sequence); posters of Universal’s *Dracula*, *The Wolf Man*, and Karloff’s Monster with electric sparks zapping the bolts on his neck; busts of the Wolf Man and Frankenstein’s Creature; a skull and crossbones; clown and monster masks; assorted knives and manacles; and a rubber bat. Among the baseball equipment and sports pennants, a bulletin board with badges and rosettes, a shelf of books, a fish tank and a mouse cage, these horror objects are located in a homely milieu.¹ There is

nothing inherently horrific about these items; they are rendered domesticated and safe, suitable memorabilia to represent a child fan's interest in the macabre.

It is also significant that the opening of *The Funhouse* refers to more recent films in the horror genre, juxtaposing them with these "subtle horrors" that are contemporaneously "out." *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) are intertexts in the sequence, and tellingly, Hooper goes on to dispel the horror of these other key films too (rather than, say, presenting a straightforward homage). Joey dons a mask—as Michael does in the opening sequence of *Halloween* when about to kill his sister—and Hooper shoots the scene as John Carpenter does, through the eyeholes of the mask. The boy then surprises his sister in the shower, pulling back the curtain and stabbing at her as Norman-as-mother does in *Psycho*. Hooper shoots the scene with angles and framing that recall Hitchcock's direction. But the connection to the horror of both films (and thereby viewer expectation) is undercut at the climax of the scene by Joey's rubber knife bending and collapsing against his sister Amy's stomach.

The comedy of the family relationship—a younger brother annoying his teenage sister—is brought to the fore, potentially working counter to the terror of the scenario. The *Psycho* intertext undercuts the familial, especially with the sexual connotations of the shower scene. Neither Billy nor Amy is seemingly aware of this, however, since they behave like typical siblings despite Amy's nudity—Amy yelling and snatching at Billy's mask, Billy running away and hiding, Amy following and berating him. Again, this domesticates the horror of the *Halloween* and *Psycho* intertexts. More importantly, it draws attention to the playfulness with which Hooper knowingly draws on classic and contemporary traditions in his work. This is an authorial sensibility that problematizes the discourse of Hooper as a director of gore films.

This hybridization of different traditions and the spectacle or modes of affect associated with them, as well as the seeming domestication of horror, establishes a context for the film. Further, the film draws attention back to the principal Universal horror intertext at the end of the opening sequence: after Joey has been upbraided by his sister, the camera pans up to the *Frankenstein* poster, and the shot is overlapped by the soundtrack of Doctor Pretorius announcing "the bride of Frankenstein" from the film of the same name (James Whale, 1935). This forms a sound bridge to the next scene; the shot of the poster is followed by a cut to Joey's parents watching the film on TV as Elsa Lanchester's bride is unveiled. Once again, Hooper establishes a connection with Universal's Gothic horrors in the viewer's mind, one firmly anchored in the domesticity of the family and the home. This connection serves not only

to locate the horror as internal (as might be expected in a postmodern horror film, in which horror arises from within the self or body and from within the home), but also to conjoin the text with the Universal Gothic mode, in anticipation of narrative developments in the later parts of the film. In other words, as Bruce Kawin (1981) also argued, Hooper emphasizes the significant ahistorical affinities between classic horror cinema and the postmodern horror film.

Such visual and textual references to Universal's horrors are evident in Hooper's work both as overt references (as in *The Funhouse*) and as subtextual or metaphorical intertexts. As Larry Dudenhoeffer sets out in his discussion of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the members of the Sawyer family are coded as versions of the classic Universal monsters; the film "takes its villains from Universal's monster series, specifically from *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Wolf Man*, and *The Mummy*" (2008, 52). *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* similarly reconceptualizes the Universal monsters. Again positioning Leatherface as a reconceptualization of Frankenstein's Creature, the *Chain Saw* sequel connects with the *Frankenstein* sequel, too, when Leatherface creates his bride by forcing Stretch to wear a mask he makes for her from the skin flayed from her radio colleague L.G. This is an image of abjection that taps into disgust, and Hooper shoots the scene not as the triumphant moment when Pretorius reveals the Bride (as in the opening of *The Funhouse*), but in a way that recalls the Bride responding to the Creature. During Leatherface's bizarre courtship ritual, Stretch, like the Bride, makes nonvocal expressions of disgust as Leatherface gestures with his hand for her to quiet down and gets her to dance with him. The textural similarity between the rock walls of the mine tunnel and the rough-hewn stone of Frankenstein's lab, and between Frankenstein's scientific equipment and the butchery tools in the Sawyer family's meat locker, reinforce the connection.²

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2 likewise reconceptualizes the Gothic castle. As well as re-creating and exaggerating the uncanny bone room of the first film in the series (the title scroll draws attention to this), the mine tunnels that form the Sawyer home are decorated and shot like the cavernous space of the Gothic castle in the Universal or Hammer *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* films. No longer an industrial space, they become an underground banqueting hall, an ossuary with bone furniture and decaying decorations, and a decrepit kitchen. Similarly, the alien craft in *Lifeorce* (1985) recalls the Gothic castle with its cathedral-like spaces—"Dracula's castle in some strange configuration" is how Hooper describes it (Hooper 2013). Its occupants, floating dead inside the ship (they are described as desiccated), are giant bats, and the "space vampires" in glass coffin-like suspended-animation pods hang upside down like bats in

the shot when they are first seen. Hooper's 1990 television film *I'm Dangerous Tonight* opens with a scene that remediates tropes of the *Mummy* films when an evil entity arises out of an ancient sarcophagus and possesses the night watchman at the museum—here the mummy's cloak casts the malevolent personality of its owner onto the wearer. Notable references to *Frankenstein* occur also in the episode "No More Mr. Nice Guy" (an origin story for the *Nightmare on Elm Street* monster) from the TV series *Freddy's Nightmares* (Wes Craven, 1988–1990). Hooper reconceptualizes the villagers hunting the Creature via shots of the "citizens' committee"—disgruntled parents angered at Freddy's release from prison on technicalities—in the power plant where Freddy lives, at times in silhouette, with (electrical) torches, and shotguns and hammers in lieu of pitchforks. Shot largely in darkness, these scenes and the ones that follow, showing the parents stalking Freddy through the suburban streets, draw further attention to the Universal intertext. And even before being burnt up, Freddy is, like the Creature, a caricature or—better—a simulacrum of a man. Frequently shot with backlighting or in deep shadow, he is faceless and personality-less, and he cackles (like a witch or a lunatic) and taunts the parents. He is seemingly without motivation except a drive to kill. Moreover, he is a supernatural creature, one not created by science but reborn out of a desire for revenge.³

The Universal Gothic intertext works in Hooper's films as a counterpoint to what is often cited as the 1980s mode of horror—that is, explicit gore and violence. The stylistic and thematic hybridity of Hooper's self-conscious referencing of classical horror traditions alongside those of contemporary horror films makes clear that the different traditions of horror are neither discrete nor easily contained by discourses of historical cycles. In *The Funhouse*, for example, the opening sequence primes the viewer to accept the Universal monsters as safe viewing for families and their children. When Amy and her friends enjoy the carnival attractions and sideshows, several carnies costume themselves as Universal monsters: the magician dresses as Dracula, and the carnie operating the ride at the funhouse wears a Frankenstein mask. The fact that the carnival is populated by these familiar monsters extends the safely domestic monstrosity of Joey's bedroom uncannily into the unfamiliar spaces of the carnival. But the Universal intertext works alongside the slasher aesthetic in the second act of the film when the teens dare themselves to spend the night in the funhouse and are subsequently stalked and killed by the same seemingly domesticated monster. The Monster gives Amy "the creeps in that [Frankenstein] outfit," pre-saging Joey's experience when he encounters the traumatic monstrosity hidden within the domesticated monster. The Creature of subtle horror is reconceptualized by the Monster of 1980s body horror. In this way, the Gothic intertext operates as a metatext.



Figure 1.1. Fallada discussing vampires in *Lifeforce* (Tobe Hooper, Cannon Films, 1985).

THE GOTHIC AND THE CARNIVALESQUE

James Keller (2008) proposes that intertextual references can operate as meta-texts, commenting on or constructing an alternative dimension of the narrative. A case in point is *Lifeforce*, which relocates the vampire to science fiction territory. The Gothic intertext, with references to adaptations of the novel *Dracula* (1897) in particular, forms a commentary on the nature of the “space vampires” (60–61).⁴ This metatext is particularly constructed around the character of Professor Hans Fallada. The casting of Frank Finlay, who played Van Helsing in *Count Dracula* (Philip Saville, 1977), a BBC TV adaptation of Stoker’s novel, facilitates the linking of Fallada to Van Helsing. Hooper shoots the scenes of Fallada in his formal suit with immaculately coiffed hair in compositions similar to those featuring Van Helsing in the 1977 version, and to analogous scenes in Hammer and other *Dracula* adaptations (fig. 1.1).

Finlay’s performance, formal speech patterns, and serious demeanor highlight the connection. Much like Van Helsing, Fallada is knowledgeable—he speaks assertively to Colonel Caine about matters of death, the life force, and vampirism, and later imparts information about how to kill the vampires by shoving a leaded iron shaft through the energy center two inches below the heart. In this scene, Hooper frames Fallada center-screen, pulling back to show the staked vampire body, with the camera then circling around to reveal Fallada’s scientific equipment. This strengthening of the connection to Van Helsing allows Hooper to reconceptualize the Gothic text and reposition the character (Van Helsing / Fallada) as ultimately ineffectual and unable to resist the vampire. As a Van Helsing figure, Fallada is depicted as authoritative, but knowledge alone is insufficient to defeat the vampire. In his next scene, Fallada’s office is suffused with red light from burning London. He is framed in silhouette as he stands before the window, lit from behind by the fires, his face in shadow. He

avoids the question when Caine asks him how he survived. He mops his brow with his handkerchief as he reveals that he knows there is life after death from transference with the vampire. "Here I go," he declares when Caine shoots him and his life force streams into the sky. The visualization of this life force—a stream of blue light—recalls a similar effect used in the 1977 production when Dracula transforms from a bat into human form.

Van Helsing is thereby aligned with the vampire. As a contemporary Gothic character, Fallada is reconceptualized in *Lifeforce* to represent not only the failure of science, but also, with the decline of religion, late twentieth-century anxiety around death and the afterlife. The Gothic metatext emphasizes the film's postmodern attack on scientific truth and a rejection of the metanarrative of religion (Lyotard [1979] 1984). In the decade of Thatcher, Reagan, and the Strategic Defense Initiative ("Star Wars"), it is the astronaut and the SAS (Special Air Service) colonel who are left to defeat the vampires. This turn to a militarized masculinity is problematized, however, within the framework of the Gothic metatext. Reversing the gender roles of the Dracula narrative, Carlson is positioned in the Mina role rather than that of male hero, and, indeed, masculinity is challenged as he submits, mesmerized, to the lure of vampire. And like the Mina figure of the vampire film, he defeats the monster with an act of feminine sacrifice (in particular, this recalls Ellen in *Nosferatu* [F. W. Murnau, 1922]). Moreover, the female vampire is hyperfeminized and sexualized for the male gaze in her transformation into the sci-fi fantasy female. This draws attention to problematical gender roles in pulp science fiction, but pertinently here it illustrates how Gothic monstrosity is remediated in Hooper's films.

Such remediation is also seen in *The Funhouse*. In particular, once Amy and her friends enter the funhouse, the Gothic Monster fills the role of killer in the 1980s horror cycles discussed by Robin Wood (1987), which he considers in relation to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, but can also be applied to *The Funhouse*. With the Monster's murder of the fortune-teller, Frankenstein's Creature becomes the antagonist of the "violence-against-women movie" (80). This renders the implied sexual violence of the Gothic narrative explicit as the Monster becomes enraged by his sexual failure and murders a woman who is of his own community. Then, as the teens are being picked off in the funhouse tunnels, the tropes of what Wood terms the "teenie-kill pic" (80) come to the fore. The removal of the Frankenstein mask, revealing the Monster's monstrous features, dissipates the aspects of tragedy and sympathy inherent in the Gothic Monster. Nevertheless, the references to classic horror, and Frankenstein in particular, permit alternative, Gothicized meanings of monstrosity and alienation to emerge. The Monster's Frankenstein mask suggests a tragic creature, for example, but once the teenagers observe him soliciting sex from Madame



Figure 1.2. The bag lady (Sonia Zomina) leading a parade of grotesques in *The Funhouse* (Tobe Hooper, Universal, 1981).

Zena and then murdering her, he is revealed as the serial killer who murdered young girls in towns the carnival previously visited. Once the Frankenstein mask is removed, the Monster is revealed to be a hybridized figure. The genetic mutation he suffers from (he is kin to the baby in the preservation jar that the teens saw in the freak show tent) reconceptualizes the stalker of the slasher narrative as a Gothic monster, a grotesque.

Hooper unsettles the viewer by drawing attention to Gothicized monstrosity and the grotesque from the opening of *The Funhouse*. Not only with the carnival mannequins in the title sequence and the fat-lady poster on Joey's bedroom door in the opening shot, but also with notably grotesque figures seen in and around the carnival. When the bag lady, who is seen wandering the carnival, accosts Amy and Liz in the restroom, both she and the facilities alike are decrepit (fig. 1.2).

Her tangled hair, grimy face, lined features, and stereotypical witchlike appearance are unruly and disruptive, while her biblical condemnations of the young women recall those of the crone-like sister in James Whale's *The Old Dark House* (1932). In contrast, the fortune-teller is presented as a grotesque form of camp glam with her excessive makeup, befeathered turban, and jeweled costume, and is happy to prostitute herself to the Monster. The magician is a drunk, and the truck driver who stops to offer Joey a lift threatens Joey with a gun just to scare him and then laughs like an animatronic clown on a fairground stand—his head thrown back, mouth agape, exposing the throat. In fact, as Joey runs away and the driver laughs, the scene cuts to a banner reading, "World's Strangest Freak Animals: All Alive" and depicting the "2 headed cow." This connects the grotesques in and around the carnival with the exhibits on display in the freak show, a similarity underscored when Amy and her

friends are both alarmed by and drawn to a deformed baby in a specimen jar. Furthermore, the following shot of a laughing fat-lady figure on the funhouse tent emphasizes the connections between the freak show and the carny in the Frankenstein monster mask, who is later revealed as living kin of the deformed baby. These representations not only locate the film in the carnivalesque—and, indeed, these depictions create moments of comic-horror affect that are a feature of the carnivalesque—but also relocate the slasher alongside, and intertwine it with, the Gothic. The film is an example of that melding that Catherine Spooner calls the “Gothic-Carnavalesque,” in which “the sinister is continually shading into the comic and vice versa” (2006, 68). *The Funhouse* is an example of the interplay between the “comic flamboyance of the grotesque excess,” when the teens mock the fortune-teller, and the “sinister grotesque,” when they voyeuristically witness her murder (68). Moreover, Spooner argues that one of the most prominent features of the Gothic-carnavalesque is the sympathetic monster. In depicting the domesticated Universal Monster, Hooper draws attention to such sympathetic monstrosity (Spooner discusses Frankenstein’s Creature as an example of the sympathetic monster), yet significantly, he turns this upside down (in the carnivalesque tradition) when the decidedly more unsympathetic Monster is revealed beneath the Frankenstein mask. Gothic horror is not superseded by body horror, but is remediated and transformed by it, supporting the critical position that *The Funhouse* represents the turn from the slasher to more body-focused horror in the genre during the 1980s. It is within such a hybridized (and transformed) Gothic that Hooper recontextualizes depictions of the home and the homely.

HOMELY AND UNHOMELY

As discussed above, *The Funhouse* opens with a sequence that seems to domesticate Gothic monstrosity, and the Universal horror monsters specifically. The Frankenstein mask is already familiar from Joey’s bedroom (and extratextually as an iconic image from popular culture). It can be read as simultaneously safe (since the Universal monsters occupy a domesticated position in the family home) and unsafe (the domesticity is problematized by the Creature’s monstrosity and acts of violence). The home itself is thus a source of horror. As Elisabeth Bronfen puts it, the home is “always already split in itself, familiar and strange, safe and dangerous” (2014, 109). So the film at first presents the funhouse as a site of safe, vicarious, fun horror. As Joey embarks on the ride, Frankenstein’s Creature invites entry into a world of obviously mechanical goblins, ghosts, and ghouls. But the safe and familiar becomes strange and dangerous when the funhouse offers the sight of violent horror as the teens look down

on the carnival barker's room—the home at its heart. What they witness—the Monster's murder of Madame Zena, followed by his unmasking as the adult version of the mutant baby in the freak show—illustrates the conjunction of homely and unhomely. The unhomeliness is underscored by the barker, an uncanny figure with doppelgangers among the other carnival barkers (at the freak show and the hoochie-coochie strip show tents),⁵ and by Amy being mesmerized by his gaze each time she sees him.

Several of Hooper's films from this period (and throughout his career) similarly problematize the home. In *Invaders from Mars*, young David Gardner's home becomes an extension of the alien ship when his parents are taken over by the Martians. Here, the act of sharing a family meal becomes an uncanny, even grotesque act. Joey's parents consume burnt bacon, drink scalding hot coffee laden with undissolved sugar substitutes, and eat raw hamburger meat thickly coated with salt.⁶ At these points, the music creates an ominous mode of affect; an incessant hum with intermittent chimes playing during the second breakfast scene brings the alien into the home, illustrating Isabella van Elferen's point that "sound can be a vehicle of the Freudian uncanny" (2016, 166). The soundtrack extends the *unheimlich* alien presence into the scenes in the school, a familiar and previously homely place for Joey, with a tension-building drone followed by pulsing notes and driving thunderous beats playing over shots of the biology classroom where Mrs. McKelch swallows a frog whole, green gore running down her chin. In addition, the depictions of industrial spaces are linked with the uncanny via the accompanying mechanized sounds. Metal taps against metal in the boiler room in Joey's school, Leatherface's chain saw is an unrelenting growl, and the funhouse is driven by a grinding engine, prefiguring the murderous machinery of *The Mangler* (1995). These instances of music and sound effects are examples of what van Elferen calls the "unseen-uncanny," a mode of affect in which "sound's invisibility can cause nervous apprehension" (167).

The spectrality of the unseen-uncanny comes most to the fore with the spectral presence of Freddy Krueger in his industrial Gothic home in the *Freddy's Nightmares* episode "No More Mr. Nice Guy."⁷ He haunts the space while the citizens' committee searches it. His spectral form is signaled by the sounds of clanking chains and hissing steam, already familiar to audiences of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films. The committee's "nervous apprehension" precedes it finding Freddy's collection of murder victim memorabilia in the factory office, again signaling Freddy's spectral presence with sound—a cry of anguish from a bereaved parent.

Such representations of the unhomely echo the horrors revealed within the walls and other secret spaces of the home in the Gothic novel. As Harry M.

Benshoff argues, the Gothic is concerned with diseased or haunted domestic spaces (2017, 210). While the Martian ship, the funhouse, or Freddy's industrial locale are not recognizably traditional domestic environments, these locales have been domesticated (just as, conversely, the monster is domesticated in the suburban family home). And as Benshoff writes of the house in the Gothic novel, these places "mirror the protagonist's twisted and shadowy psyche" (210).

The Gothic metatext further reconceptualizes the home in 1980s horror in *I'm Dangerous Tonight*. Amy, like many central characters in Gothic novels, is an orphaned woman living in a relative's house. She has been taken in grudgingly by members of her extended family, but she is treated as a drudge, expected to make clothes for her aunt and care for her grandmother while suffering the passive-aggressive behavior of her cousin. (In this, Amy is also something of a Cinderella figure.) In a narrative twist, however, she is not only a resourceful Gothic heroine. When she, already the outsider in the family, brings a cursed cloak into the house and sews it into the dress that possesses all who wear it, she herself becomes the monstrous Other, causing the death of her grandmother and inviting danger into the home when she confronts the woman who stole the dress from the morgue. Hooper starkly illustrates her transformation into a red-dressed succubus with a Gothic color palette. The particularly striking use of the color red in the college-dance sequence provides an intertextual reference both to the Phantom's cloak in *The Phantom of the Opera* (Rupert Julian, 1925) and also to the figure of Death in *The Masque of the Red Death* (Roger Corman, 1964). In the scene, Amy appears as a single note of vibrant red against the monochrome décor and the black-and-white costumes of the other dancers. Similarly, when Wanda (the morgue attendant who steals the dress) kills her victim, the Gothic palette again comes into play. The darkness of the nighttime scene washes out the image into black and white, but her earring flashes red. (A news report says the woman is wearing a red dress—even though she is wearing a shiny black coat over it.)⁸

Hooper's most notable treatment of the diseased Gothic home is seen in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*. The opening scroll (and voice-over) highlights the uncanny in the original Sawyer home, with its "chairs made of human skeletons," while also playing up the violence that dwells within: the "cannibal family" that "hacked [victims] up for barbeque." This immediately draws attention to the combination of graphic and uncanny horror that permeates the sequel. Characteristics of the southern Gothic, not least the Texas Battle Land setting and the religious fervor of Lefty, sit alongside the gore, the prosthetic makeup, and the display of the chain saw as a phallus. Texas Battle Land, an abandoned amusement park, is eerily shot, with grey textural shapes and rib-like tunnels in the night, dust, and decay. When Lefty proffers a set of arm



Figure 1.3. Amy (Mädchen Amick), her red dress dominating the Gothic color palette at the dance in *I'm Dangerous Tonight* (Tobe Hooper, USA Network / MCA, 1990).

bones to help Stretch out of the hole, she reaches up to grab the skeleton hand and falls into the tunnels like Alice into a nightmarish rabbit hole. Stretch runs through seemingly endless labyrinthine tunnels lit by strings of colored lights, rendered eerie by the dusty air and crumbling walls. The sepia tones, shadows, and mist of the scene, and the bleeding walls (seen when Lefty investigates), are juxtaposed with bones, meat hooks, and the offal that cascades out of the wall. Again, this is an industrial space (a mine), but it is also a home containing the Sawyers' dining room, kitchen, and pantry.

The Sawyer family mirrors the grotesque members of the Femm family of *The Old Dark House*, whose titular structure is a moldering Gothic pile with gloomy passageways and multiple twisting staircases climbing several stories to the attic. In this respect, Whale's film is a significant intertext for the *Chain Saw* films—not to mention the Marsten House of *Salem's Lot*—and *The Old Dark House*'s attic rooms, where the cadaverous family patriarch⁹ and an insane pyromaniac brother reside, make the film a particularly apt intertext for the final sequence in *Chainsaw Massacre 2*, when Stretch escapes the mine tunnels. The connection to the Gothic metatext culminates in her climbing the stairs out of the mine. The sequence is framed and shot to suggest the staircase of a ruined Gothic castle, the summit a tower room that contains the desiccated corpse of the Sawyer family matriarch ("Grandmother") surrounded by skeleton babies and ossuary decorations. Moreover, Stretch's final confrontation

with the Sawyer family positions her alongside the Gothic's "madwoman in the attic" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979). In parallel with the madwoman of Victorian fiction as discussed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979, xxxvi), Grandmother is an embodiment of the unruly woman interred (literally, in this case, since she is a mummified corpse) in the place of the disenfranchised female character. Hooper transforms this Victorian Gothic trope by making the attic a sepulchral shrine to the matriarch of the disenfranchised (cannibal) family. Alongside Grandmother, Stretch is in a different class of madwoman, one for whom "mad" is a synonym of "angry." The attic is the site where she kills Chop-Top, and thus in Hooper's reconceptualization of the Gothic home, the madwoman in the attic signifies the anger and the ascendance of the Final Girl.

HOOPER'S HYBRIDIZED AESTHETIC

The case studies discussed above—which focus on representations of the home and the family, transformations of the tropes of the monster (particularly Universal film monsters) and the madwoman in the attic, and aspects of the Gothic-carnavalesque—provide an account of the hybridized Gothic in Hooper's films. This is illustrative of the way in which Gothic intertexts and metatexts are significant components of 1980s horror cinema and suggests that ahistorical approaches to horror films permit understandings of horror cinema beyond the periodization and subgenre codings of popular criticism. Thus, they challenge the perception circulating in the dominant fan and magazine discourses at the time that 1980s horror solely represented a turn to graphic gore and violence. Moreover, the particular mix of restrained and graphic aesthetics in Hooper's films offers heterogeneous viewing pleasures, potentially making his work appealing to horror fans with differing sets of tastes and preferences. The borrowings and repurposing of Gothic tropes are particularly significant in Hooper's films of the 1980s, when body horror and slasher films were in the ascendancy, but—in recognition of Hooper's contribution to more extensive Gothic themes in postmodern horror cinema—can also be identified across his body of work. His earlier films, including *Eggshells* (1969), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and *Eaten Alive*, include examples of uncanny Gothic architecture and themes of mental deterioration, and explore mistrust in "official" institutions. The past weighs heavily on the present in these films, and home is always a source of (twisted) pleasure, security, perversion, and degeneration.

Of his later films, the haunting images in *Toolbox Murders* (2004)—the old building undergoing renovations, grotesque characters, dream of a dead father resting in his coffin, objects hidden in the walls, secret messages, "missing" apartments, and arcane symbols—work alongside the gore of the slayings

with hammer, nail gun, drill, and other tools, the bodies hung on meat hooks and dismembered, and the disfigured murderer Coffin Baby. The graveyard setting, moldering house and funeral home, creeping tendrils, sounds of creaking wood, exploding lightbulbs, ossuary, and the unseen figure in the closet and mausoleum of *Mortuary* (2005) create apprehension in parallel with the bodily decay and spewing bodily fluids of the possessed, the zombie attacks, the oral penetration by fungus, and a head blown off by shotgun, which inspire disgust and mortify the viewer.

The reconfiguration of Hooper's body of work around intertextuality and hybridity repositions it in ways that offer more complex interpretations than those included in much scholarship and journalistic discourse. This reevaluation provides one way to address the misconception of Hooper as a "goremeister" and is certainly evidence that he employs a more complicated aesthetic than he is often given credit for. The hybridity observed in Hooper's work might go a significant way toward illuminating troubling features of Hooper's aesthetic that many attribute to unevenness (tonally, thematically, etc.) or, worse, his losing touch with his craft. Horror films frequently employ aesthetic hybridity, of course. Nonetheless, Hooper's hybridized aesthetic is a testament to how the postmodern horror genre and the Gothic are far more complex than some reductive accounts of Hooper's graphic violence suggest.

NOTES

1. A similar collection is seen in Mark's room in *Salem's Lot* (1979), his interest in monsters and magic similarly bringing the classic horror film into the family home.
2. Chop-Top can be read as another reconceptualization of Frankenstein's Monster, having been constructed (or reconstructed) by the brain surgery he underwent as a result of machete injuries sustained in the Vietnam War.
3. It should also be noted that the classic horror film is not the only Gothic intertext in Hooper's films. As John Kenneth Muir ([2002] 2015, 19) notes, the Starlight Hotel in *Eaten Alive* suggests a southern Gothic setting, as do the abandoned hotel and swamp locations in *Crocodile* (2000).
4. Hooper spoke of it as making a "70 mm Hammer film" (Hooper 2013).
5. Kevin Conway plays all three roles, creating the uncanny effect.
6. This revisits the dinner scene in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and a similar scene is depicted in Hooper's *Mortuary* (2005).
7. And Krueger, of course, inhabits the landscape of the industrial Gothic in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films.
8. In other scenes, such as when Amy is interviewed in the college canteen or at the morgue, the lighting creates barred or crosshatch shadows from window blinds and chain link screens, in keeping with the noir/pulp origins of Cornell Woolrich's 1937 source story.
9. A figure who, as played by a female actor (Elspeth Dudgeon), is gender-queered, signifying that the father is the madwoman in the attic.

POLTERGEIST

TV People and Suburban Rage Monsters

JOAN HAWKINS

THE UNCERTAINTY HAUNTING *POLTERGEIST* (1982) is the question of authorship. *Poltergeist* was Steven Spielberg's first big success as a producer, and as Vincent Canby points out, for many critics "it seems much closer in spirit and sensibility to Mr. Spielberg's best films than to Mr. Hooper's" (1982, C16). John Kenneth Muir notes that as early as 1981–1982, as the film was being shot in Los Angeles, "rumors flew fast and loose through Hollywood that *Poltergeist's* über-producer Steven Spielberg—not the credited director Tobe Hooper—was actually responsible for the direction of the film. The industry press enthusiastically ran with this story in reviews of the movie and innumerable behind-the-scenes reports, and to a very significant extent Hooper's reputation was never able to live down the gossip" ([2002] 2015, 2; emphasis in the original).

That gossip targeted nearly every aspect of the film's production and release. "Who really directed it?" Eric Henderson asked in *Slant* magazine. "Spielberg's contributions to the project are self-evident and overwhelming. The Californian suburbs, nuclear families, Industrial Light and Magic, a vivacious, wholly idealized vision of motherhood that verges on the Oedipal; it's as though Spielberg watermarked the film like Pathé used to do in the early days of cinema" (2007). Similarly, *TimeOut* (2011) notes that the film is "credited to Hooper, but is every inch a Spielberg film." Roger Ebert (1982) compares its central concerns to those in Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) and seems at pains to find traces of Hooper's core concerns in the movie. Even academic critics and scholars tend to consider *Poltergeist* part of Spielberg's oeuvre. Andrew Gordon argues that *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), and *Poltergeist* form Spielberg's "suburban trilogy" (2008, 55). James Kendrick follows suit, including *Poltergeist* in his discussion of Spielberg's "Weekend America" series in his excellent *Darkness in the Bliss-Out* (2014, 24–68).

While the film looks more like *E.T.* or *Close Encounters* than *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), and while it certainly deals with many of Spielberg's favorite themes, Tobe Hooper's love of the surreal (Muir [2002] 2015, 5) permeates the film, along with his recurrent treatment of a horrific capitalism, his interrogation of the displacement of original populations (whether of workers and classes, as in *Texas Chain Saw*, or of the dead, as in *Poltergeist*), and his sometimes pessimistic view of American history. Spielberg receives story credit as well as first-screenplay credit for the film, suggesting that Hooper would have had to crawl out from under Spielberg's "vision" even if left entirely to his own devices. The content of the film is obviously very much drawn directly from Spielberg's favorite themes, and so, unsurprisingly, the film resembles his other films of the period. But the treatment of the family here is darker than we usually see in Spielberg. And the breakdown of community, seen in the unwillingness of Diane's neighbors to come to her aid, is much closer to Hooper's (or John Carpenter's) sensibility than it is to Spielberg's. Finally, the technophobia or mediaphobia of the film—the way television functions as both a portal for ghostly or demonic forces and as a sign of the breakdown of family, community, and capitalism—seems more reminiscent of Hooper's horror than of Spielberg's.

It is not my intention here to try to separate authorial strands—to delineate who was responsible for what in *Poltergeist*. Rather, having made the case for the film's inclusion in an auteurist study of Tobe Hooper, I want to parse the complexity of a movie that is too easily dismissed from serious consideration both by Hooper's fans and by horror fans and scholars. Rather than debating the degree to which the film is a Spielberg work or a Hooper work, I suggest that Spielberg's important contribution may have been in bringing Hooper's concerns and themes to a wider public, that Spielberg perhaps made Hooper legible to moviegoers who would rather eat human flesh themselves than buy a ticket to see anything by the director of *Texas Chain Saw*.

Poltergeist tells the story of a family—the Freelings—whose home is invaded by spirits that seem to come from the TV set. Initially, it isn't clear what exactly they want—or what exactly they are. But the youngest Freeling child, Carol Anne, is fascinated by them. When she is literally spirited away—into the TV—to be with them, the family turns to a university team of parapsychologists for help. After a particularly unsettling session with the spirits, the team brings in a psychic, Tangina. Under Tangina's direction, the family mom, Diane, crosses over to the other side and retrieves her daughter. The house is now supposedly clean of supernatural forces, but the family still thinks it would be best to resettle. The night they pack up to move, the spirits return with a vengeance—not through the TV this time, but from the ground below the house. It turns out

the Freelings' subdivision was built on a cemetery. The company that developed the subdivision told the Freelings that the cemetery had been moved, but really that was just a cosmetic gesture. The tombstones were moved, but the bodies were left behind. And they are not at rest. At the end of the film, the family flees as the house implodes.

THE TELEVISION SCREEN AS THE RETINA OF THE SOCIOCULTURAL EYE

As the above description suggests, *Poltergeist*, like Joe Dante's *Gremlins* (1984, also produced by Steven Spielberg), shows that bad things happen when you turn on the tube. The film begins with a black screen while the "Star-Spangled Banner" plays on the soundtrack. Then comes the title card "Metro-Goldwyn Mayer presents / A Tobe Hooper Film / *Poltergeist*." The first image is an out-of-focus, grainy, snowy detail from the iconic photograph *Raising the Flag at Iwo Jima*. Our attention focuses on the hands reaching up, a shuddery foreshadowing of the skeletons that later come up from the graveyard below the Freelings' house (fig. 2.1). As Jeffrey Sconce notes, "the shot is unsettling, not unlike the repeated shots of the mysterious photograph in Antonioni's *Blow-Up*" (2000, 164). And as with *Blow-Up*, it takes a while before we realize what we are seeing: a TV screen just as the station is signing off. As the camera dollies back, we see Dad (Steve) asleep in a chair. The camera follows the family dog, E. Buzz, as he moves from room to room, introducing us to all the family members: Mom (Diane), teenage Dana, nine-year-old Robbie, and four-year-old Carol Anne. As we watch, Carol Anne wakes up, comes downstairs, and begins what will be her horror-ific relationship with the TV people. "They're heeere," she says, turning away from the conversation with the "TV people" that has awakened her family.

The shot of a television set turned to static repeats several times throughout the film. Carol Anne turns the dining room TV to a dead channel to watch static the morning after she first made contact with her new mysterious friends. And later, during the first storm sequence, Mom, Dad, and the two youngest kids sleep together in the parents' bedroom, illuminated by the blue light from the TV they have forgotten to turn off. Even before the poltergeists manifest, the film suggests, TV has a soporific effect, and the intense close-ups "of the screen's shifting static suggests a sinister electrical presence to the apparatus, exploiting the ambiguity of television as a technology, a virtually sentient being, and a gateway to an electronic unreality" (Sconce 2000, 164). The fact that TV becomes the horror portal here is humorously underscored at the very end of the film when the family—finally safely liberated from their home—checks into a Holiday Inn and removes the motel's TV set from their room.



Figure 2.1. *Raising the Flag at Iwo Jima* in hypermediated detail in *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, MGM/UA, 1982).

But the network convention of playing the anthem and iconic national images at the end of every broadcast day also underscores a connection between the soporific effects of the medium and a nation that has perhaps been lulled to sleep. On the night of the storm, for example, Steve is reading a book about Ronald Reagan,¹ the first TV president, while his wife gets stoned and talks about a childhood proclivity for sleepwalking, the TV of course turned on in the background. Later that night, Carol Anne will be literally sucked into the TV, her presence becoming as ghostly-electronic as the previous sign-off images. Like the pods in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956; Philip Kaufman, 1978), *Poltergeist's* TV people “get you while you sleep.” Or at least while your parents sleep. And as with *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, there seems to be a political connection between monstrous supernatural forces at work and a general political climate of dozy conformity and studied capitalist ignorance (e.g., the signifying headstones are moved, but the substance—the bodies—remain).

The subdivision where the Freelings live is packed with houses that all look alike. Steve makes a living selling these houses, and one scene shows him trying to convince prospective buyers that every house being the same, with perhaps just a few individualistic touches, is indeed the American Dream. (Later, the headstones, too, all seem to look alike, with a few individualistic touches; see fig. 2.2.) And interestingly, long before the poltergeists manifest, TV is shown to be a problem in Cuesta Verde. The Freelings share a remote connection with their neighbors, and at the beginning of the film a humorous set piece makes use of this fact: Steve and his cronies try to watch a football game, but the next-door neighbor keeps changing the channel to *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

Later, TV monitors become a source of information as a parapsychology



Figure 2.2. “Little Boxes”: houses and graves in *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, MGM/UA, 1982).

team uses them to play back the time-lapse photo images of the ghostly presences in the house. The relationship to media imaging and its association with capturing death here recalls the presence of photography in *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. In that film, media imaging is a combination of forensics and art, while in *Poltergeist* it is simply forensic. But even here, the medium apparently misleads, since it lulls the family and the psychic team into believing that the house is clean, when it most definitely is not. Spielberg is a fan of Shirley Jackson, so the cozy team hanging out with the Freelings, as if on an extended family sleepover, recalls *The Haunting of Hill House* (novel, 1959; film, 1963). But the parapsychology team also plunges the film into a TV story line, specifically something that might come from the 1972 TV series *The Sixth Sense* (ABC), which ran in syndication throughout the 1970s. (It was added to the Rod Serling *Night Gallery* syndication package.) In the series, a university professor and his students investigate mysteries involving the paranormal, becoming closely involved in their clients’ lives as they educate them and the viewing public about parapsychology. In *Poltergeist*, too, the scientists both comfort and educate the aggrieved family, frequently signaling to the viewers when we, too, should be upset.

The cinematography continually refers to TV, whether the set is on or not. As Muir notes, “The strobing light of the television is constantly reflected on the face of the film’s principals and . . . the self-same coloring and lighting scheme is used to render the closet doorway to the nether-region. Both the blue light in the closet and the blue light of the TV set represent the same thing: portals to places that can steal your children away” ([2002] 2015, 89). As the ongoing quarrel with the neighbors suggests, TV is also a barrier to human relationships and community. And in perhaps a dig at Spielberg, it lulls us into believing too much in set narrative structures; it lulls us into believing in happy-ending

closure. "This house is clean," Tangina announces to the TV-video camera, although the worst is still to come.

For Muir, the television allusions are an important part of the film's point. *Poltergeist* "without reservation equates the television with evil," he writes. And for him, it is the satiric tone of this equation, its commentary on "American values in general and the role of TV in our society in particular," that links the film with Hooper's oeuvre rather than Spielberg's. "Spielberg is a gifted filmmaker," he writes, "but a satirist he is not" ([2002] 2015, 87). While his comment about Hooper's signature use of satire (and Spielberg's lack of satire) is well taken, *Poltergeist's* use of the television set as a symbol is a little more nuanced than he makes it here. Certainly Hooper, Spielberg, and the entire generation of 1970s filmmakers were heavily influenced by TV—which often became the point of entry into classic Hollywood and horror. So I am not convinced that either Hooper or Spielberg regard the TV, as such, as evil. But the way it both puts people to sleep in this film and separates them is clearly symbolic of the way that family members lose touch with one another and with the larger community. And as George Romero frequently points out in his work, the television is a powerful hegemonic device; its programming increasingly broadcasts materialistic values, opulence, and excess, to such an extent that people began to expect such opulence as a given.

Muir provides an extended analysis of the ways the film seems to both predict and critique the specific values of the Reagan era. And while its historic specificity is important, most important here is the way *Poltergeist* interrogates and asks us to interrogate the ground on which the American Dream, writ large, is built, the way it interrogates the great repressed story of slave labor and indigenous genocide. As Bernice Murphy (2009) points out, the country was founded on claustrophobic settlements built on land stolen from people they did not understand. And this originary settlement impulse parallels that behind Cuesta Verde and other settlements like it. When Steve confronts his boss, Mr. Teague, about the cemetery-foundation for Cuesta Verde, Teague is nonplussed. "It's not like it was an ancient tribal burial ground," he says, referring to criminal land grabs from indigenous peoples. But even if we accept Teague's argument, that the disturbance of the cemetery doesn't constitute a crime because it entails white Americans desecrating burial grounds of their people, the construction of Cuesta Verde still represents the desecration of historical memory (underscored by the fact that the skeletons have so many identifying markers—a string of pearls on one, for example). It is clear that history is being lost as the departed are plowed under and bulldozed over in order to make room for capitalist progress and greed. And the peculiar disturbance that affects the Freeling home begins with this odd cultural amnesia. The dead don't

realize they are dead, the parapsychology team tells the Freelings. They observe the living and feel frustrated because they can't join in.

The film never quite lets us escape the question of originary plunder (what exactly is being plowed under and covered over). The name of the subdivision itself, "Cuesta Verde" (Spanish for "green slope" and evocative of the typical topography of a cemetery), is a reminder of California's difficult geopolitical history with Mexico. This is a theme that Hooper revisits in later films, most notably *The Mangler* (1995), with its town's welcome sign erected directly on the grounds of a cemetery. Here the construction plans for Cuesta Verde also involve not so subtly pitting one part of the American middle class against the other, in a land conflict not unlike the country's original clashes of interest. When Teague worries that Steve is planning to move to another company, he takes him to a hilltop and asks him to imagine the view. Steve says the hilltop view is great, but that the people in the valley (where he currently resides) wouldn't be pleased to see houses cutting into the hillside. "You won't be in the valley anymore," Teague replies. As Muir notes, "*Poltergeist* not only punishes the greedy, the real estate tycoon . . . it punishes those who benefit from the greed and moral lassitude of others. The Freelings go through hell not because they did anything *really* wrong themselves, but because they have inadvertently prospered by the unseemly business practices of Steve's firm" ([2002] 2015, 89). And by extension, by the unseemly business practices of the country's founding impetus (the near genocide of Native American people, land grabs from Mexico, and slavery). It is something that in similar contexts we might refer to as "white privilege" now. This last point is underscored by the fact that Cuesta Verde was apparently started during the US bicentennial year, 1976, when almost every TV channel carried a particularly whitewashed "200 years ago today" nightly history lesson that emphasized the revolutionary ideals of the Founding Father firebrands but said nothing about the fate of non-Europeans living on soon-to-be-American soil.

But there is also a certain culpability that the Freelings share with all baby boomers. It is suggested in a throwaway line early in the film. The morning after Carol Anne has seen the TV people for the first time (and before she is abducted), Diane discovers that chairs are moving in the house, that there seems to be a kind of force seam in the kitchen. Anything placed on this invisible line will move. When Steve comes home from work, she is ecstatic, having apparently experimented with this phenomenon all day. "Reach back into your past," she tells him before demonstrating the centrifugal force splitting the house, "when you used to have an open mind," apparently alluding to some freer—or at least more free-thinking—time in their past (and perhaps harking back to the hippie roots of Hooper's filmmaking).

Muir is right in saying that the Freelings go through hell not because they did anything “*really* wrong,” in the immediate sense. They did not knowingly build houses over a desecrated cemetery, or buy and sell houses knowing the history of the property. But like all boomers, they did, Hooper seems to suggest, sell out—embrace the capitalist dream they once rebelled against. And in that sense, they share in a collective generational hypocritical guilt—perhaps best illustrated when Steve and Diane are smoking pot while Steve reads a laudatory book about Ronald Reagan (the president who declared war on drugs). And as Muir suggests, they did profit, as have all white middle-class people, from the founding crimes of the peculiar US-based capitalist model.

The film continually refers to American myths and fairy tales. The night of the big storm, when Carol Anne is swept away, a big tree limb comes in through the window and grabs Robbie. The tree has already alarmed the child, since it is misshapen and seems to have a human face. When it comes alive, it is reminiscent both of Disney cartoons and of *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939). And the black funnel cloud that appears in the sky that night is a clear reference to Oz, that uniquely secular American fairy tale, which is often interpreted to be about American labor politics.

Poltergeist, then, can be read as a meditation on what happens when all the foundational myths and stories of middle-class America (both overt and repressed)—the American Revolution, Iwo Jima, *The Wizard of Oz*, the American Dream of owning your own home, the utopian counterculture dream of creating America anew—return to haunt you. Like the best of all haunted Gothic stories, *Poltergeist* shows how “the past continues to shape the psychic realities of the present” (Clemens 1999, 4), and how it demands an accounting.

“AMERICAN COMMUNITY” IS THE NAME OF A BANK

Early in the film, we get an idyllic view of Cuesta Verde—children playing in the street and riding their bikes, and adults strolling through the neighborhood—as though the subdivision could be the equivalent of a town square. In this first shot, the palette is red, white, and blue, and people move about in brightly tricolored clothes, once more signifying the American Dream. As the camera dollies in, however, the street empties out—and it isn’t clear whether that original shot was meant to be a real shot of Cuesta Verde—some lost historical Edenic moment—or a promotional ad for the subdivision, or some other fictional fantasy, because we never see such a shot again.

The opening moves to a series of medium close-up and close-up shots of some kids playing with radio-controlled cars. They are plotting to sabotage a drably dressed adult who has ridden his bike to the store on a beer run. The

kids succeed in their mischief. The adult loses control of his bike, drops the beer, and ends up carrying a damaged, spurring beer case into the neat Freeling subdivision home. This scene is followed by the comedic neighborly battle for control of the television channel (football or *Mister Rogers*?) as Freeling and his neighbor, Ben, stand on their balconies, clicking their remote controls at one another's houses. Later, Diane and Steve go to the same neighbors—the Tuthills—to ask whether they've experienced any disturbances. The neighbors clearly think the Freelings are crazy, but there is another odd comedic bit here: Steve and Diane are bitten repeatedly by mosquitoes on their neighbors' porch while Ben keeps saying he has never been bitten.

All unscheduled interactions, anything other than inviting friends and professionals into the home, are mediated through male competition. When the kids begin missing school, when strangers arrive carrying electronic equipment, no women come to the house or call to see whether Diane needs a hand. This lack of support is underscored when Dr. Lesh, a woman who comes into the home as part of a professional team, shares a powerful bonding moment with Diane. (This, the film seems to say, is how we think human contact is supposed to work.) The whispered conversations in the living room at night between Diane, Dr. Lesh, and Robbie also seem to indicate that women (and children) form quiet, even secret bonds during the only time they have available to them—while everyone else sleeps.

As in slasher films in which kids lead semiautonomous lives, teenage Dana can stay with friends and craft an alternative offscreen reality for herself. (It is interesting that she is the Freeling about whom we know the least.) But Robbie has to be sent off in a taxi to his grandparents when his parents become alarmed; there are no friends he can stay with. And the only person outside the family who arrives at the house to express concern is Steve's boss, Mr. Teague, who is worried more about losing a valuable employee than about the family's well-being. Much of this has a tongue-in-cheek, slightly cynical, humorous edge—encouraging us to laugh at the ups and downs of moving out of the city to a newly constructed housing development. But the lack of real community, seen early on here, turns harsh later in the film when the dead begin to rise. Reminiscent of the scene in *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) when neighbors turn their porch lights out while Laurie bangs on their door begging for help, *Poltergeist* shows neighbors—annoyed by Diane's screams—unwilling to help her save her children.

In some ways, then, the Freelings become the middle-class equivalent of *Texas Chain Saw*'s Sawyer family, illustrating the dangers posed by a tribe left to fend for itself against the ravages of capitalism. And there is a *Chain Saw*-like anxiety in this film about the future of a family whose patriarch is failing.

Poltergeist gives us the genteel version of a clan that could begin cannibalizing itself and others. When Mr. Teague arrives to check on his employee in the middle of the day, Steve is drinking and clearly feeling the effects of alcohol, a lack of sleep, and a lack of clear purpose (other than the nebulous one of staying with his family). He doesn't really have anything to do. Diane is shown doing most of the communicating with Carol Anne and the paranormal research team, for that matter, and she does have a household—however put-upon she is—to run.

It is not until Diane crosses the threshold to reclaim Carol Anne, and Steve has a clear physical task to perform, that he snaps back into focus and begins to really function like a husband again. The scene of Diane's return is figured exactly like a rebirth. A bloody mother and baby are plunged into a bathtub of water. Carol Anne's nose and mouth are cleared by professionals while Steve looks lovingly at his wife. Finally, Carol Anne wakes. Mother and baby are pronounced fine, and the family can begin again. This is doubly symbolic, since the film makes a point of letting us know that Carol Anne was born in the house, and it may be that that original home birth made her uniquely susceptible to the TV people who haunt the house and cannot rest.

TV PEOPLE AND THE LAND

Two kinds of spirits haunt the Freelings in *Poltergeist*: the TV people, associated with problems of reception, transmission, and technology, and the rage demons, associated primarily with the material world and the land. Both have links with the larger sociopolitical landscape of the film. Both occupy and manifest in the same site (the house and yard), and both want Carol Anne.

As the above discussion points out, this is a film obsessed with TV, but it is also grounded in very real concerns about land use, and it plays on what Carol J. Clover (1992) has called "urbanoia," a kind of horror that occurs when people move out of the city. Usually this entails going to the backcountry, where city dwellers encounter "people who are not like us" (124). But it also happens in suburban horror like this one in *Cuesta Verde*, where upwardly mobile boomers re-create the western expansion, taming the land and raping it in pursuit of some benighted vision of the good life. (As Murphy [2009] points out, the swimming pool is a particularly vexed site in this film.)

Hooper establishes the duality early on, and through crosscutting teaches us to pay attention to disturbances in both realms. While Steve and Ben play out their remote-control rivalry during the football game sequence, Diane is upstairs making the beds in the kids' room. And the film switches back and forth, between her world and theirs. As the men roar downstairs, she finds

Carol Anne's pet bird, Tweety, dead in its cage. She is just getting ready to flush it down the toilet—its bright yellow plumage a jarring match for the canary-yellow color scheme of the Freeling bathroom—when Carol Anne sees her and demands a canary burial. They tuck the bird into a cigar-box coffin and give it a little funeral in the flower garden. The cigar box resurfaces later as a precursor of the climactic cemetery scene when a big Caterpillar backhoe shovels it up in the process of digging the Freeling's pool. The camera holds the shot just long enough to ensure that we notice it, tossed over on a pile of dirt.

Throughout the film our attention is drawn to the Caterpillar, the pile of dirt, and the open hole that marks the swimming pool site; that is, to the materiality of capitalist practice and to the physical threat that such rapacious land use poses to the family (and to society writ large). Long before Carol Anne is sucked into the tube, her mother fears she will fall into the swimming pool hole. And it is only when Diane herself falls into the excavation site and sees the skeletons rising to the surface, near the end of the film, that she and we understand why the ghosts are incessantly restless.

The TV people are freaky, but they seem more lonely than anything else. They spirit Carol Anne away because they are attracted to "her vitality." These TV-land ghosts seem linked with the spectral souls that descend the staircase one night in a magnificent luminescent cluster—the ones, who, Tangina and Dr. Lesh tell us, don't realize they are dead. The spectral cluster is gorgeously uncanny, but not horrifically frightening, like the rage monster. This scene, and several others in the film, is reminiscent of turn-of-the-century phantasmagoria shows, both in imagery and effect. The family, particularly Diane, reacts to them as a sight of sublimity more than of terror. And of course, as Sconce might argue, the TV brings a phantasmagoria into the living room every time you turn it on.

The rage demon, by contrast, seems to reside nowhere and everywhere. It manifests out of Carol Anne's room, but doesn't necessarily live there. It has a face and a recognizable shape, and its impetus seems to be pure fury, strong enough "to punch through," as Tangina says, to our material world. Like the TV people, it wants Carol Anne, but it is unclear what it plans to do with her. "It keeps her close," Tangina tells her worried parents. "It lies to her. She thinks it's another child." Clearly, Carol Anne is afraid of it, in a way she isn't afraid of the TV people. When it comes back during the movie's climax, she presses against her bedroom wall, saying, "No more."

But the demon also seems connected with the scary tree outside Robbie's window, the one that attacks him during the first big storm. (In this film, sunny California is as tempestuous as the plains states.) And it might have something to do with the bizarre supernatural behavior of Robbie's clown doll. It



Figure 2.3. The rage monster in *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, MGM/UA, 1982).

certainly provides the impetus for the final destruction of the house, the walls being sucked in on themselves as the terrified family drives away. The climax of *Poltergeist* bears more than a little resemblance to the gear-room finale of *The Funhouse* (1981), but it also has a certain poetic justice. It is probably too big a stretch to call *Poltergeist* an eco-horror film. But the climax definitely has the effect of returning rule to the land as much as to the dead.

GHOSTS

In her excellent phenomenological study of ghosts in the theatre and cinema, Alice Rayner argues that “ghost stories act out suspensefully the projects of estrangement by which habits of perception are shocked into a recognition of the reality of death” (2006, 175). Here it isn’t the reality of death that needs to be shocked into recognition, but rather the capitalist system’s callous indifference to death—a system that will churn up anything, pave over anything, sacrifice anything in the interest of making a buck.

I stated earlier that *Poltergeist* presents a darker view of the nuclear family than Spielberg generally gives us. The Freelings seem happy enough: Mom, Dad, three kids. But while that configuration might constitute an ideal in most films, horror continually subverts the image of the happy American family, focusing, as Robin Wood (1978) notes, on the personal sacrifices that continually must be made in order to sustain the illusion of perfect individual fulfillment within the unit. *Poltergeist* is less concerned with pitting the familial ideal against individual desire than do the films that Wood discusses. But it does call into question the idea that family alone is—or should be—enough. The idea that barricading ourselves in what the folk singer and activist Malvina Reynolds in 1962 famously called “little boxes on the hillside / Little boxes made of

ticky tacky” should be equated with the good life, with the American Dream, with opportunity.² If nothing else, the film warns, such an image of suburban plenitude creates a false need for ever-expanding housing developments and for markets that will be forever haunted by the ghosts we have plowed over in search of the American Dream. Certainly, the TV images we see throughout the film—the football games, Mr. Rogers, old movies—are the ghosts of an American Dream that never quite materialized. And the fact that critics (and Spielberg as well) were so eager to suborn Hooper’s contribution to this film is perhaps the most striking indication of how subliminally aware we all are of the bankrupt, privileged realm we inhabit. The film may end on a comic note, but *Poltergeist*’s main message is darkly Hooperesque. Spielberg’s structure and machinery helped bring Hooper’s critical concerns to a broad audience, but once you scratch the surface of the film, you find an intelligence more reminiscent of the one behind *Texas Chain Saw* than the one that made *E.T.*

NOTES

1. Hendrick Smith’s *Reagan: The Man, the President* (New York: Macmillan, 1980).
2. Reynolds’s “Little Boxes” was also recorded by her friend Pete Seeger in 1963.

TOBE HOOPER'S TEENAGE WASTELAND

Youth and Disillusionment in *The Funhouse*,
Invaders from Mars, and *Mortuary*

KRISTOPHER WOOFER

I wanted to capture, to recapture those images that literally burned holes in my mind, in my imagination and dreams when I was a child.

TOBE HOOPER, ON *INVADERS FROM MARS* (1986)

THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE (1974) presents a horrific spectacle of the end of innocence. What begins as a ritual return to sites of reverence and ruin—a cemetery and a family estate—rapidly disintegrates into encounters with shocking, unmitigated violence shunted smack up against the protagonists' comfortable world of road trips, swimming holes, and childhood nostalgia. *Texas Chain Saw* and Hooper's first feature, *Eggshells* (1969), pit their youthful communities against a growing awareness of conditions that undermine their youthful idylls. *Texas Chain Saw*'s more horrifying, radical stripping away of naïveté links with the folkloric tradition of quests for individuation that are marked by extreme violence. The folk-fairy tale parallels its young, unformed protagonists' individuation with mental and physical trauma and the threat of being consumed or annihilated, as Christopher Sharrett notes, comparing *Texas Chain Saw* to "the Hansel-and-Gretel story of apparently innocent youth stumbling upon unexplained and unimaginable evil" (2004, 303). In the folk-fairy tale, the (near) annihilation of the young quester is almost as wished for as the reconstituted self. (Hansel and Gretel, hungry and abandoned, arrive at the witch's house to consume.) Curious, ultimately disillusioned youth appear in celebrated Hooper films such as *Salem's Lot* (1979) and *Poltergeist* (1982), but are more acutely part of quests for worldly knowledge in the films studied here. *The Funhouse* (1981), *Invaders from Mars* (1986), and *Mortuary* (2005) depict youthful wonder tested and, arguably, compromised. All three films examine what it looks like when worldly experience, usually in the form of violent spectacle, strikes young eyes.

In *The Funhouse*, a group of curious teens confront “something wicked” in the dark heart of a small town’s roving carnival, adolescent curiosity rooted in fears of the nonnormative, “freak” body and of a breakdown in child-parent relationships. More a morose *bildungs*film than a slasher, *The Funhouse* echoes youth-oriented works such as Ray Bradbury’s *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962) in its melancholic equation of death with adult embitterment and the end of sexual innocence. *Invaders from Mars* hesitates unsettlingly between loving pastiche and subversive parody of the gee-whiz attitude characterizing its disturbing 1950s source film (William Cameron Menzies, 1953), via the equally hollow, bankrupt 1980s of its moment. The young protagonist, David Gardner, a science and sci-fi geek, ultimately cannot wrest himself from the film’s nightmare world of abject alien bodies and spaces; his final response—shock and awe—to the monstrous things his parents have become (and more likely always were) echoes Sally’s wide-eyed horror in *Texas Chain Saw*. Finally, *Mortuary*’s maundering, cynical young protagonists inhabit an environment of power lines, strip malls, bubbling sewage sludge, next-door cemeteries, industrial wastelands, death, deformity, and cosmic bio-horror in a world overwhelmed by the detritus of late capitalism. *Mortuary*’s mise-en-scène of rotting waste may be the bleakest (and most Lovecraftian) landscape in any Hooper film. Its postindustrial environmental sickening recalls the “blasted heath” of H. P. Lovecraft’s “The Colour Out of Space” ([1927] 2014b, 361), presaging the film’s classically Weird subplot involving a hungry otherworldly demigod. Like *Invaders*, *Mortuary* strands its youths in the act of witnessing this terrible reality, and like both *The Funhouse* and *Invaders*, it centers on a Hooper trope: the “degenerate” (Kawin 1981, 30) or degenerating family struggling against cultural collapse.

DARK CARNIVAL: *THE FUNHOUSE* AND THE SPACE OF INITIATION

We got to watch out the rest of our lives. The fight’s just begun.

RAY BRADBURY, *SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES* ([1962]
2017, 260)

Hooper’s fifth feature, *The Funhouse*, frames its Weird quest around the seedy knowledge that comes to town with a traveling carnival. The film’s cast of youths is an odd assortment; four horny teens who go to the carnival seeking thrills and sexual experience (in some cases, their first); a young monster-loving kid, Joey Harper, who sneaks out seemingly to follow them; and the childlike primary “monster,” a mask-wearing murderous—yet also sympathetic—“freak.” Seeing Joey climb out his bedroom window and down the rose trellis to walk in darkness

to the carnival evokes Bradbury's classic American Gothic novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962), an important intertext for Hooper's film. Bradbury's brooding coming-of-age novel investigates as much as celebrates nostalgic notions of boyhood and manhood, sons and fathers, in 1950s and 1960s America. In Bradbury's world, the carnival troupe—the "autumn people" ([1962] 2017, 176)—carries the lost souls of those tempted by its promises of eternal youth. The "carnival," writes Bradbury, "smells boys ulcerating to be men, paining like great unwise wisdom teeth, twenty-thousand miles away" (185–186). To experience the dark carnival¹—and particularly its carousel, which magically renders one younger or older depending on the direction of rotation—is to be punished for naïve idealism as well as curiosity. Despite cloying father-son bonding moments in the novel's final act, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* melancholically subverts what Margaret Atwood calls America's "façade" of "Rockwellian normality" (2017). Stephen King writes, "The book asks us to recall and reexamine the facts and myths of our own childhoods," "most specifically our small-town American childhoods" (quoted in Bradbury [1962] 2017, 312).

Hooper's *Funhouse* carries Bradbury's dark carnival concept into a jaded and broken world—a world where even the carnival collective is riven by "family" trauma. *The Funhouse's* traveling carnival—with freaks and sex on display—presents titillating spectacles explicitly linking new experiences with bodily anxieties in ways that Bradbury's novel only suggests. Still, Hooper maintains Bradbury's interest in what Joel Lane calls a "dark folklore of the everyday," in which "signature motifs—burial, old age, childhood, autumn, insomnia, festivals—are key pressure points in the life of every individual. Points at which the application of stress causes bruises of terror and loss" (2016, 24). Hooper's titular funhouse is full of jerking mechanical bodies, laughing and leering and, as always in horror, turning on spectators a confrontational gaze mirroring their own. The ubiquitous barker illustrates perverse pleasures, framing the funhouse as "that world of darkness" where the spectator-participant will experience "no release," "no escape."

Nearly every image of sexuality presented to the young carnivalgoers is corrupted or tainted. When the youths peer into the strip-show tent, for example, they find a crowd of mostly older men leering at naked, dancing middle-aged women—a scene that, coupled with a disturbing funhouse sex scene (also observed voyeuristically by the teens), becomes a decidedly guilt-inducing spectacle of male impotence and faded beauty. In the later scene, the teens have stayed past closing time for some heavy petting on a funhouse set that resembles a tainted Eden. Beneath them, through a crack in the floorboards, they witness a primal scene between the funhouse operator—a Frankenstein's-Monster-mask-wearing "youth"—and the fortune-teller, Madame Zena. Zena

begrudgingly gives the operator (billed as the Monster) a handjob for money. Her treatment of him uncomfortably combines sexual instruction and maternal consolation, which turns to humiliating mockery when he prematurely ejaculates, prompting him to murder her in a shamed frenzy. The teen voyeurs' curiosity is rewarded with a punishing introduction to sex as they witness a pathetic, intensely private moment of initiation into adulthood.

In stature and manner, the Monster seems a twentysomething adult, but he also uncannily mixes unformed youth and old age, as Adam Lowenstein argues elsewhere in this collection. He is preverbal and irrational, but his nervousness, discomfort, and premature ejaculation suggest a rite of passage. Additionally, his wearing a monster mask parallels the actions of young Joey, who, in the film's opening scene, enters the family bathroom wearing a clown mask and pretends to murder his sister, Amy, with a rubber knife while she is taking a shower. Parodying the opening of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), released just three years prior, and Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), the scene forges a compelling connection between the Monster and Joey: both disguise their faces, both have troubled familial relationships, and both indulge in sexualized violence, very real for the Monster, though playful and experimental for Joey. The latter's bedroom features a wall of maces, shackles, and knives displayed alongside a more innocent collection of Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi horror posters and masks.

Monstrosity here is complicated. Joey—an innocent victim who is later driven home, exhausted and traumatized, by his parents—is aligned with dark sexuality via connections with the Monster, and via his sexual curiosity and pretend violence when “murdering” Amy. The Monster garners sympathy when we see him beaten and harangued by his father, the carnival barker, and shamed by Madame Zena, the only character that could be a mother figure for him.² Performed by the mime Wayne Doba (Kawin 1981, 29), the Monster, similar to Karloff's Creature in James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), is a living, breathing, desiring human (body) with an almost piteous need for human contact, parental love, and sexual release. (The *Bride* intertext is key here.)³ Just like *Texas Chain Saw's* Leatherface, who garners sympathy in his moments of worry, defensiveness, and anxiety about protecting his home, the Monster has an ostensibly underdeveloped mind in a freak body. Both characters commit their violent crimes in defense of the family, protecting (the fantasy of) home and family ritual. The teens' invasion of this privacy in both films ironically positions them as witness-voyeurs, a moral quandary recalling the words of *The Funhouse's* harbinger figure, who tells Amy and her friend Liz: “God is watching you. . . . He hears everything.” *The Funhouse's* teens are all killed by the Monster and his father, and only Amy survives.



Figure 3.1. Inside the freak show tent in *The Funhouse* (Tobe Hooper, Universal, 1981).

In *The Funhouse*, the entire adult community seems to work as a corrupt cabal disenfranchising the young. The fat-lady automaton looming above the funhouse entrance is a mocking, laughing maternal figure (prefiguring Madame Zena) beckoning people to enter the funhouse and be “punished.” Hooper introduces Amy and Joey’s parents by showing them watching *The Bride of Frankenstein*, the mother in an alcohol-induced stupor and the father a hollering gatekeeper, disapproving of Amy’s date and her plans to attend the carnival. The carnival barker, the Monster’s biological father, handles him like one of the farm animals he exploits in his freak show. Indeed, displayed in the freak show is his other son, a deformed, twisted infant floating in a glass jar (fig. 3.1). The freak-show tent is the first place in the film where the youths are confronted with a challenge to human exceptionalism. As in the *Texas Chain Saw*’s family living room, human and nonhuman animal bodies—“creatures of god, ladies and gentlemen, not man”—are displayed with no hierarchical distinction. The frailty of the body is exploited here—a lesson the teens later learn the hard way. Among the oddities are a two-headed cow that turns to view the spectators heads-on, and another cow with a palate cleaved nearly to the eyes that constantly licks the large valley where its nostrils should be, staring forlornly at the camera. Signs in the background reading “Approved by the S.P.C.A. and the Humane Society” and “Danger, Do not molest the animals” only add to the scene’s incredible discomfort. This is one of the film’s most nuanced character scenes. The teenagers—even the guys, who have brought the girls there to prime them for sex later on—stare in discomfort rather than disgust at the unfortunate creatures. Even more than the sex-infused scenes, looking at these deformities is a dark rite of passage. In scenes such as this one, Hooper’s dark carnival pushes its sights and sounds into existential territory, where ugly, abandoned things bubble up abjectly from cultures of desire.

DREAM QUEST: *INVADERS FROM MARS* AND THE PARANOID CHILD

It was just a bad dream, that's all.

INVADERS FROM MARS (TOBE HOOPER, 1986)

If *The Funhouse* is deeply skeptical of the lure of adulthood, Hooper's *Invaders* abandons it altogether. *Invaders* unfolds like a child's totalizing dream. A close remake of William Cameron Menzies's disturbing 1953 film, in which alien invaders turn young David MacLean's parents into chilly, abusive automatons, Hooper's *Invaders* is uneven in tone—part whimsical pastiche of the original's 1950s Cold War context, part critique of its naïveté around youth and institutional authority. The original film is bleak and dark, its young protagonist always hanging back or peeking around the side of an adult—traumatized youth stripped of vitality. Hooper eschews this gravity to maintain an almost fevered energy in the film; and its wide-eyed protagonist, David Gardner, is overstated and excessive. The *Los Angeles Times* critic Michael Wilmington, in a positive review, cites the film's "conscious campiness" and unevenness as a particular strength: "There's something so anachronistic and out-of-scale about it, the *reductio ad absurdum* of overblown '80s movie making. . . . If you can tap into Hooper's oddball rhythms and cold sendups, you can enjoy yourself" (1986). Young David is the sci-fi equivalent of horror-kid Joey in *The Funhouse* (and Mark in *Salem's Lot*). His room is decked out with a telescope and posters of planets, his bedspread patterned with swirling images of the cosmos. The film opens with David and his dad, George, a NASA scientist, lying on the grass and gazing up at the stars, in an almost impossibly idyllic father-son moment, underscored by lilting music. Their peace is eventually interrupted by killjoy Mom, Ellen, announcing bedtime, because "it's a school night." The scene's saccharine quality reads ironically from the get-go; the music is too sweet (double Spielberg with a cherry on top), and the obvious artificiality of the set-bound location and the quasi-parodic performances undermines the moment, suggesting something not quite real. Wilmington notes the scene's uncannily unstable artificiality: "The sky shakes oddly. (Are those real constellations—or part of the ceiling from the local Starlite Lounge? Or is somebody moving a matte sheet?)" (1986). Nothing in Hooper's sci-fi/horror remake is grounded in objective reality. We are in the space of total, unstable childhood fantasy.

Hooper's *Invaders* is a child's fever dream, a fantasy construct of small-town microcosm as global macrocosm, the degeneration of social and cultural structures occurring in ways that make sense to a child—this child.⁴ Everything seems to be a narcissistic projection of David's nightmare "school night" reality: threats exist in proximity to his home and school, and anything associated with

these sanctified spaces is suspect in this postinvasion paranoid reality. Parents do not protect children but abandon them to violation by outsiders; teachers do not nurture young intellects, but sell brains wholesale to alien others. David wakes up during the first night in a storm to witness a Martian spaceship burying itself just over the hill, past the fence that demarcates his suburban home from the California desert (Latham 1995). Hooper and the production designer, Les Dilley (*Star Wars*), re-create the original film's hill with its boundary-marking split-rail fence so exactly that it, too, seems the product of a dream. The fantastical light show as the spaceship descends, reminiscent of Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), is more akin to the iridescent lure of *The Funhouse's* carnival than to Spielberg's benevolent guardians of cosmic knowledge. David's home is a kind of house on the borderland,⁵ perched between troubling reality and terrible fantasy.

As in *The Funhouse*, the adult world in *Invaders* is largely corrupt or easily corruptible. With the exception of David's school nurse, Linda, everyone in a position of authority—cops, soldiers, parents, teachers—manifests adult villainy. Alien tunnels burrow directly under the school; the Martian at the center of the tunnels is the "Supreme Intelligence"—to a child, an Othered version of seemingly unachievable parental or adult intelligence derived from "impossible" experience beyond textbook learning. David's science teacher, Mrs. McKelch,⁶ keeps frogs in closed jars in the classroom and later secretly eats them, once she has been transformed into a Martian henchperson. She is closely in league with the aliens, often seen holding court with the Supreme Intelligence in its lair. Her red "kidnapper" van contains a menagerie of animals embalmed or in cages, presumably kept for classroom "science" instruction. When David enters the van while trying to evade her, Hooper and the cinematographer, Daniel Pearl, shoot the interior exactly like the living room in *Texas Chain Saw*—not from soon-to-be victim Pam's perspective, but from a demonstrative authorial perspective that performs the space itself as unhinged. Mrs. McKelch's primary pursuit vehicle is a school bus, waiting to take David away on a "field trip" to be transformed with the rest of his classmates.

The film's narrative logic is claustrophobic in manifesting a singular adolescent fantasy about childhood's demise. The film holds tightly to a sentimental symbol of filial love, a 1958 copper penny that David's Dad gives him the night the Martians arrive. The hill hiding the aliens from David's home is Copper Hill, and copper is the primary fuel source sought by the Martians. The penny turns up later in the film as the fuel source required to operate a laser that releases David and company from the Martian tunnels. David inserts the penny into a slot as if playing a video game. "You aim, I'll fire," he tells a soldier, oddly aligning himself with excessive phallic-military power. The psychoanalytical reading



Figure 3.2. Young David Gardner's shock and despair in the final image of *Invaders from Mars* (Tobe Hooper, Cannon Film Distributors, 1986).

here is one the film encourages, with its global threat to family and domestic spaces and its focus on childhood ignorance and fear of sex and the body.⁷ The production designer, Dilley, explains, "We went with an organic feel" for the sets, versus the sleeker, "futuristic" sets in the original (Hooper 2006), and this "organic" set design rivals the vaginal, orifice-driven aesthetic of *Alien* (1979), also scripted by Dan O'Bannon.⁸ *Invaders'* visual scheme is more anal than vaginal, in keeping with the film's particularly masculine fears of sexual violation during boyhood. Human hosts are invaded via a screw that penetrates the subject from behind, leaving a puckered, anus-like orifice in the back of the neck.⁹ Other abject penetrative connotations abound: desert vortices swirl and open up to suck in unwitting victims; David calls the Martian henchmen "huge, ugly, slimy, giant Mr. Potato Heads"; and the Supreme Intelligence is a protruding proboscis with a bulbous head emerging from his own giant, puckering orifice¹⁰ in the twisting, colon-like tunnels (which smell like "sulfur dioxide"). David even refers to the Supreme Intelligence as "Dickbrain." The invaders from Mars invade your town and your body in ways that suggest anal penetration; thus, the "cheeky" catharsis when David inserts his penny, takes up the phallic alien laser, and fires to save the day.

Hooper ends on an ambiguous note. David's guilt-ridden paean to his parents as the alien ship explodes above them—"Mom, Dad. I love you, but please understand I just can't come with you"—anticipates the "death" of the parent. It renders problematic Dad's later *Wizard of Oz* moment when he says, "Seems like your dream is full of all the things that happened to you today." David wakes up from another dream at the end, only to observe the alien ship land again. As before, he immediately rushes to his parents' room to report the sighting. Hooper keeps the frame exclusively on David's reaction of shock and

horror at whatever his parents are doing, or have become, and the film freezes on his screaming face (fig. 3.2) while the soundtrack provides growling, grunting sounds like those made by the alien henchmen. David's awakening from a second dream, along with the renewed arrival of the spaceship, can be read as either a belief in the powerful fantasies of childhood, or a replay of those fantasies as a wholesale retreat from reality by a child now primed for suspicion.

WEIRD COLLAPSE: *MORTUARY* AND THE "COLOUR" OF DISILLUSIONMENT

Something was creeping and creeping and waiting to be seen and felt and heard.

H. P. LOVECRAFT, "THE COLOUR OUT OF SPACE" ([1927] 2014B, 372)

Mortuary, Hooper's last US-produced feature, opens on a young girl, Jamie, clutching a teddy bear in the backseat of a car, a tentative look on her face as she scans the passing scenery: endless strip malls, crisscrossed power lines, rusty signs, and commercial billboards weathered by the Southern California sun.¹¹ "It's a new career for me and a new start for us," says her mom, Leslie, but the images are of a total dead end. *Mortuary* is an appropriate coda to a body of work about communities subject to the whims of compromised, uncanny domestic spaces in an American postindustrial wasteland. Here, "home" is the place where death lives. The landscape of *Mortuary* is how things might look after the carnival of *The Funhouse* has moved on: abandoned sludge-filled yards, pervasive environmental abuse and decay. The family is met by the sleazy city councilman (and, apparently, amateur real estate entrepreneur) Eliot Cook, who sold them their new home. "You know," he says, "they opened up another nursing home since you were here last. County owned. *Cha-ching*. . . . Not to mention, we got the most dangerous highway in the state out there. Believe me, you'll have lots of business." Old age and highways leading to literal dead ends are the "hopeful" realities here.

Mortuary is another Hooper collaboration with the writers Jace Anderson and Adam Giersach, who wrote *Crocodile* (2000) and *Toolbox Murders* (2004),¹² and it features their penchant for dread-soaked atmospheres that become characters in their own right. The "house by the cemetery" consciously echoes *Polytergeist's* Cuesta Verde ("Green Slope"), itself built on a cemetery, with another looming over it. *Mortuary's* titular structure is a quintessential Hooper home: a place of death and business, fear and family. The mortuary-home links embalming and preburial preparation with family prosperity and livelihood. It butts up against a (real) cemetery, which itself butts up against an industrial



Figure 3.3. View from the house by the cemetery, and by the postindustrial waste, in *Mortuary* (Tobe Hooper, Echo Bridge Entertainment, 2005).

space set off by a chain-link fence and bordered by railroad tracks—once a sign of progress and prosperity, now a backdrop to despair. That the location was real (only the mortuary-house was moved in to complete the setting) adds to the film’s late-capitalist despair (Hooper 2008).

Land in *Mortuary* is literally diseased, sickened, infected—in part by the cosmic tendrils of whatever lives and feeds in the well below the labyrinthine tunnels, and in part by two centuries of so-called industrial progress. Pervasive social and environmental decay and collapse, coupled with the film’s self-conscious allusions to H. P. Lovecraft, align *Mortuary* decidedly with the Weird tradition. As Ann and Jeff Vandermeer explain, Weird works “remain universal because they entertain while also expressing our own dissatisfaction with, and uncertainty about, reality” (2011, 14–15). Certainly, in pitting young questers against a bankrupt, hopeless, monstrous reality, *Mortuary* turns knowledge of the diseased environment—and their unfortunate connection with it—against its questers, in classic Weird fashion.

While the film’s script superficially cites a line from Lovecraft’s fictional grimoire *The Necronomicon*—“That is not dead which can eternal lie. And with strange aeons even death may die” ([1921] 2014a, 80, 92)¹³—the film’s truer Lovecraft intertext is “The Colour Out of Space” (1927), in which the rural Gardner family comes into contact with a cosmic force that invades their farm, their bodies, and their minds with degenerative infection. In Hooper’s film, we learn that from the outset the place was hostile to America’s aggressive westward expansion: a settler named Zebediah Fowler “came out here to

get into the cattle business, like everyone else. That's where the money was. Problem was, nothing grew on his land; there was something in the soil, something bad." Lovecraft's story, like *Mortuary*, ends with the total dissolution of the Gardner family, who destroy one another in madness and anguish. In the Lovecraft story, the whole location is swallowed up into the depths of a new reservoir, part of a presumed path toward progress. It is worth noting here that the change of surname in *Invaders from Mars* from the original film's David MacLean may be another nod to Lovecraft's story. Like Lovecraft's Gardners (gardeners), the Gardners of Hooper's *Invaders* experience an extraterrestrial infection that links them, mind and body, with their invaded land in order to turn them into servants. The difference in tone among the three films discussed here is that in *The Funhouse*, the "invasion" of unsuspecting suburbia by the traveling carnival is culturally sanctioned and comes with only an inkling of knowledge about ephemeral and flawed humanity, which plays out on a much larger scale in *Invaders* and *Mortuary*.

Additionally, *The Funhouse* is the outlier in that of the three films, it has been looked upon relatively favorably by the majority of fans and critics. *Invaders* disappointed because of its tonally unstable, amped-up pastiche of 1950s gee-whizzery, and *Mortuary* likely failed to register at all because of similar tonal inconsistencies and an overloaded premise.¹⁴ In brief: A family (mom, son, daughter) moves to a decrepit, unlivable house by a cemetery with a mortuary in its basement after the death of their mortician husband and father (Hooper 2008). A murderous man-child, Bobby Fowler, is rumored to (and does) stalk the area, living beneath the cemetery in a tunneled-out lair (recalling many such spaces and perverse dwellers in Hooper, including *The Funhouse* and *Invaders*, but also *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* [1986] and *Toolbox Murders* [2004]). Bobby feeds (and protects) the ravenous Lovecraftian demigod that lurks underground and produces a viscous cosmic black mold that spreads tentacular tendrils and slugs, infecting people with a zombie-like plague that makes puppets of them. Leslie succumbs, spending much of the film pursuing her children and their friends. In the film's most absurd scene, Leslie invites her son's (Jonathan's) friends to dinner, serving them a concoction of the fungal slop that infected her and forcing them to say what they are thankful for, at a kitchen table surrounded by walls covered in fungal tendrils. Despite such typical moments of dark comedy, the film ends bleakly: Jonathan meets his end in a pool of sludge, Jamie is taken away by Leslie to certain doom, and only Jonathan's girlfriend, Liz, is left to an unknown fate.

The excessive premise of *Mortuary* feeds a pervasive apocalypticism: home is a graveyard, a postindustrial space—a world on the brink of collapse. The scenario is a logical quasi conclusion to Hooper's artistic preoccupations. In

a February 17, 2016, blog post on *Letterboxd*, Julius Banzon's favorable review of the film describes *Mortuary* as "a series of disparate musings on industrial decay, structural rot, civic mismanagement, teenage agency, death, loss, family" and cites it as an essential example of the director's aesthetic temperament—particularly Hooper's valorization of thematic preoccupations and allusiveness over coherent narrative.¹⁵

One of *Mortuary*'s most poignant and affecting scenes, showing a young girl meeting the monster, is a case in point: highlighting the power of Hooper's almost whimsical intertextuality, it evokes James Whale's *Frankenstein* and recalls the meeting of the monster-kid Joey and the Monster in *The Funhouse*. In the scene, young Jamie has been abducted by Fowler and taken to his lair beneath the cemetery. Fowler's lair is bedecked with dangling wizened corpses, souvenirs, trinkets, and remnants of coffins, its walls, like those of the monster kids in Hooper's *Funhouse* and *Salem's Lot*, covered with pictures. Also notable is Fowler's resemblance to the gimp-like figure in *The Funhouse*, the Hollywood serial killer of *Toolbox Murders*, and, of course, *Texas Chain Saw*'s Leatherface—all "children" protecting their safe spaces, but starved of care and attention. As described by Liz, Fowler is "horribly deformed. Cleft palate. Mute. Hands all messed up." With quasi sympathy, she adds, "And his parents abused the shit out of him." Fowler is more curious about than hostile to Jamie. He keeps her in a cage that he does not lock. He tries to touch her face but gets swatted away. He shakes a rattle made of a human skull on a stick in an attempt to amuse her, but only increases her terror. When she offers him a piece of licorice and shows him how to eat it, they connect. Fowler's pleasure at the moment prompts him to show Jamie a handful of the same candy, presumably stolen from her bedroom, but in doing so he turns his back, allowing her to escape.

The moment is brief, but evokes many such moments of sympathy for the monster in Hooper's work. The fantasy of connection between the film's two most curious "youths" shatters in an instant. *The Funhouse* and *Invaders* spectacularize youthful wonder on the brink of collapse, whereas *Mortuary* takes us past that brink. The only remnant of hope in this postindustrial world is, ironically, a tiny square of cultivated grass thrown down like a rug for Jamie to play on. Yet Jamie is pulled into the death house by her infected zombie mother, her future uncertain. In the end, the family is destroyed, leaving the space absent of people and the home an abject embodiment of human failure.

The Funhouse, *Invaders*, and *Mortuary* are Hooper's most sustained treatments of youth. Despite the attitudes of their young protagonists—ranging from incorrigible curiosity to pessimistic disaffection—all three films interrogate whether youthful wonder can be sustained or recovered in an American

wasteland.¹⁶ The films localize their terror (cosmic or otherwise) in tight, confining spaces—embalming rooms, underground lairs, snaking tunnels—that, like *Eggshells'* basement “presence” or *Poltergeist's* desecrated grave site, destabilize the foundations (literal or metaphorical) of the spaces above. A Weird reality linking humanity with an almost infantile ignorance, and all prior knowledge with deception, bubbles up abjectly. All three films offer versions of the doomed suburbia rendered cautiously in *Poltergeist*; yet unlike *Poltergeist's* focus on thirtysomethings and the soul-stripping suburban project, these films focus acutely on the cost to the younger generations of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century America.

At the center is the child as Weird quester, curious and willing to seek out occulted, unexplored knowledge and often suffering devastating consequences for the effort. The child quester becomes a witness, another major trope shared by folk-fairy tales and horror. Roger B. Salomon suggests that the witness role is “crucial” to horror (2002, 76–81) as an entry point into the representation and interpretation of extreme experience:

The authority of the witness in horror narrative comes from something terrible actually seen or done—or done *to* one. The witness, in effect, becomes the spokesperson of the essential point of view of the ghost or monster, someone who, at the very least, can begin to describe something of what is on the other side of the threshold. . . . If the initiation is categorical, witnesses in horror narrative are literally or figuratively those who have returned from the dead, and what they have essentially to affirm is the fact and nature of unredeemed death itself. (80–81)

Salomon highlights “initiation” as endemic to the experience of the horror witness, and we find the character who has “returned from the dead” severely, irreparably marked by experience—and even taking on a dark responsibility in bearing this knowledge for later generations. In Hooper’s darkly anticapitalist, confrontational fantasies, these disaffected “undead” youths are the future.¹⁷

NOTES

1. *Dark Carnival* was the title of Bradbury’s first story collection, published in 1947 and revised and published as *The October Country* in 1955.

2. The Monster’s father chastises him for having killed “one of the family” after he murders the fortune-teller, making her the kind of makeshift parental figure that the oldest brother becomes in *Texas Chain Saw*.

3. Bruce Kavin, for example, notes in his favorable 1981 review of the film that “in

the end the monster tries to make Amy his bride in death" (30–31). In Kavin's analysis, the carnival funhouse is like the horror genre itself: it thrills and disturbs, shocks and amuses, and models the genre's reflexive pleasures for the spectator.

4. John Kenneth Muir discusses the film's "meditation on childhood" ([2002] 2015, 108) as being limited to David's dream perspective but, regarding this angle, prefers to dwell on the film's evocations of David's "*media-saturated* 1980s childhood" (106–107, original emphasis) as at least in part an extension of Hooper's own allusive cinephilia (109–110).

5. The reference is to William Hope Hodgson's *Weird* 1908 novella of the same title, with its house perched along a rift that separates conventional reality from a mind-shattering alterity.

6. Louise Fletcher as Mrs. McKelch gives perhaps the best "worst" performance ever, channeling every bad 1950s genre performance of sinister authority into one role. She earned a 1987 Razzie nomination for it at the 7th Golden Raspberry (Razzie) Awards.

7. Muir's reading links the film's sexual imagery almost entirely to David's "fear of alienation from his own mother" ([2002] 2015, 109).

8. He shares credit on *Invaders* with Don Jakoby, who scripted Hooper's *Lifeforce* (1985).

9. The insertion requires the subject to lie facedown, arms and legs spread out, in a parody of the anal-probe lore associated with alien abduction.

10. Muir describes it as a "bio-mechanical anus" ([2002] 2015, 111).

11. The film's initial alignment with this character recalls the narrative framing of Hooper's pilot for the TV miniseries *Taken*, "Beyond the Sky" (2002), with its melancholic child voice-over (by Dakota Fanning) ironically undercutting any nostalgic paean to a 1940s America that (never) was.

12. And the mostly regrettable *Mother of Tears* (2007) for Dario Argento.

13. The screenwriters, Jace Anderson and Adam Giersach, revise (or misquote) the line (from "The Nameless City" [1921]) to read, "That which is dead cannot eternal lie. With strange eons even death may die."

14. *Mortuary* had no theatrical release after receiving its world premiere on October, 21, 2005, at the New York City Horror Film Festival (<https://nychorrorfest.com/2005-film-festival>).

15. Banzon's cinephilic and acute sensitivity to Hooper's work suggests the importance of treating writing by fan communities as one of the first sites of "recovery" of neglected works.

16. Hooper's interest in childhood, seen across a large number of his films, makes him a significant figure among directors of youth-oriented horror-fantasy, including Joe Dante (*Gremlins* [1984], *Explorers* [1985], *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* [1990], *The Hole* [2009]), Tibor Takács (*The Gate* [1987], *Gate II: The Trespassers* [1990]), and Tom Holland (*Fright Night* [1985] and *Child's Play* [1988]). This is the territory of further work I am doing on the *Weird bildungsfilm*.

17. Thank you to Lorna Jowett for invaluable editorial assistance with this essay.

SALEM'S LOT

Tobe Hooper's Gothic *Peyton Place*

TONY WILLIAMS

America is not a young land: it is old and dirty and evil before the settlers, before the Indians. The evil is there waiting.

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS, *THE NAKED LUNCH* ([1959] 1991)

New England towns are small and they are often pretty . . . but if you go beneath that picture, it's like turning over a rock with your foot—all kinds of strange things crawl out.

GRACE METALIOUS, AUTHOR OF *PEYTON PLACE* (QUOTED IN CAMERON 2015)

THE OFFER TO DIRECT *SALEM'S Lot* came at a most opportune time in Hooper's career, when he was threatened with obscurity following the critical and commercial failure of his follow-up to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *Eaten Alive* (1976). A collaboration with the producer Richard Kobritz, the scenarist Paul Monash, and an accomplished group of actors, the project was Hooper's chance to show that he could work within the system, despite his dismissal as director of *The Dark* (John ["Bud"] Cardos, 1979) a few months prior.¹ Working within the constraints of American network television, Hooper and his collaborators produced an American Gothic melodrama that showed the director's acute awareness of a dysfunctional America. While *Salem's Lot* could have been just another two-part CBS movie of the week, trading in any claims to artistry and instead trading on the popularity of its source material, Hooper's darkly Gothic sensibility produced a "laconically beautiful" (Kawin 1981, 29) film in a "hybrid" (Jowett and Abbott 2013, 79), "anti-televisual style" (Brown 2018, 154) that further updated Stephen King's exploration of the vampire trope.

Salem's Lot is informed by several literary and cinematic forebears, with

particular nods to Hitchcock, lurid melodramas such as *Peyton Place* (novel, 1956; film, 1957; ABC soap opera, 1964–1969; see Earnshaw 2014b), and Hooper's own previous work. Hooper subtly develops these elements, leaving cues for an aware audience that he did not sell out creatively but rather built upon aspects of these earlier works according to his new production circumstances. Though he left behind the world of independent filmmaking and graphic horror, the restraints he faced resulted not in a dilution of his creative energies, but rather in their subversion within the structure of a late-seventies television two-part miniseries for a major American network (Magistrale 2003; Earnshaw 2014b; Brown 2018, 151–156).

A new version of those Old Dark Houses initially seen in Hooper's *Eggshells* (1969), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and *Eaten Alive*, Salem's Lot's Marsten House dominates the landscape of its titular New England town. Salem's Lot appears devoid of any wealth-producing agricultural or industrial activities; there is little evidence of the recession and postrecession effects of the oil-depleted early 1970s that affected the livelihood of *Texas Chain Saw*'s Sawyer family. That the vampire Kurt Barlow and his lackey, Richard Straker, come to town ostensibly to open an antique store underscores the sedate inertia of such towns. Like the motel run by Judd in *Eaten Alive*, Hooper's Salem's Lot appears less economically devastated than alienated from economic and political realities. Like vampires themselves, the citizens of Salem's Lot appear eager to "enjoy" the economic benefits of Barlow and Straker's new business venture—a potential, darkly symbiotic relationship reflected in Straker's comment to the writer-protagonist Ben Mears, "You're going to enjoy Mr. Barlow. And he'll enjoy you."² Salem's Lot is a town that followed Gerald Ford's advice to put Vietnam behind it, presaging Reagan's "morning in America." But as so often in the American Gothic tradition, dark secrets lie in wait. And an alternative history awaits its revelation.

AMERICAN GOTHIC HISTORICISM: *EGGSHELLS*, *SALEM'S LOT*, AND COUNTERCULTURE FATIGUE

Hooper's Gothic perspective on American history—in which official, memorialized history doesn't necessarily tell the true story—appears throughout most of his early films, especially in his first feature, *Eggshells*, which opens with an anti-Vietnam War demonstration in which protesters carry a flag-draped coffin on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin. *Eggshells*' opening sequence is a powerful combination of image and sound: the school motto, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free," appears prominently, monumentally on a stone sculpture, with the protesters' more ephemeral banners



Figure 4.1. The Marsten House looming over the titular town in *Salem's Lot* (Tobe Hooper, CBS, 1979).

proclaiming, “The Government is violent, not us.” All the while, the accompanying song functions like a Brechtian musical chorus: “nobody will talk to you,” “nobody will look at you,” “don’t talk to nobody and nobody will talk to you,” “it’s too bad, damn, but it’s got to be true.” The lyrics anticipate the grotesque use of country-and-western ballads in both *Texas Chain Saw* and *Eaten Alive*. Such features in *Eggshells* also anticipate John Henry Faulk’s presence as a drunken local in the cemetery at the opening of *Chain Saw*, offering a similar critique of local denial.³ A significant line in *Eggshells*, “What’s wrong with this country?” also refers to Hooper’s generic depictions of blinkered cultural amnesia. An abject manifestation of repressed history in its own right, the Marsten House, with its familiar dark past, dominates the town of Salem’s Lot, a monument to similar denial. The townsfolk do not engage in such denial outright, but minimize its dark significance. Ben Mears, returning to the town after some years, is one local boy who refuses to do either, actively taking on the role of Gothic investigator into an unsavory past.

The threatening Old Dark House in *Salem’s Lot*—and before it those in Hooper’s *Eggshells* and *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*—is a staple of both the literary American Gothic and its twentieth-century cinematic incarnation. Its most celebrated example is the Bates house in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), though arguably its most Hooper-like evocation is in James Whale’s *The Old Dark House* (1932), with its depraved Femm family living seemingly well off the grid.

That film features an odd array of perverse characters: a preverbal, gimp-like servant, Morgan; an insane brother, Saul, locked in an upstairs room; and a nearly embalmed centenarian grandfather (played by a woman, Elspeth Dudgeon). The “degenerate” (Kawin 1981, 30) American family in cinema may well have its origins in Whale’s perverse vision, and Hooper seems to be well aware of the fact, offering variations on the theme from *Texas Chain Saw* forward. The Old Dark House trope appeared even in Hooper’s earliest work, such as the ten-minute experimental documentary short *Down Friday Street* (1966), which combines surrealistic imagery of old houses, opulent interiors, and structural decay and—complementing *Eggshells*’ lament for a more communal way of living—juxtaposes images of detritus and demolition to create a new Austin of concrete parking spaces for the migratory suburban consumer. In spirit, *Down Friday Street*, like *Eggshells*, is an avant-garde film that depicts the emotional fatigue of the counterculture generation.

Eggshells features an old house inhabited by hippies, with a dark basement whose amorphous, quasi-Lovecraftian occupant will eventually destroy them at the climax, in a manner reminiscent of the Sawyer family’s industrial food processing of humans in *Texas Chain Saw*. The radical potential inherent in youth is rendered impotent in *Eggshells*.⁴ The demise of the film’s four hippie youths evokes a transformation of their bodies into a mixture of blood and oil, a metaphor for the war machine that the ineffectual demonstration at the beginning of the film fails to stop. *Eggshells* depicts a world in which vitality is slowly ebbing away, in which the younger generation is incapable of fulfilling the hopes of the Age of Aquarius, which warns that “the road leads to nowhere.”⁵ Change happens, but it is the wrong kind of change: four young victims will be crushed into pulp within the bloody machinery of war, and eventually evaporated into smoke. *Eggshells* is a film in search of a coherent structure that Hooper eventually found within horror and melodrama. In *Salem’s Lot*, this structure comes in Gothic tropes that subtly convey the subversive issues of dominance and exploitation that appear in *Eggshells* and Hooper’s earlier independent films. In *Salem’s Lot*, the Old World vampire and his lackey suck the life out of the New World inhabitants of Salem’s Lot, starting first with its youth (the film’s first two victims are the preteen brothers Ralphie and Danny Glick), and displacing them in favor of their antiques.

HITCHCOCK’S AMERICAN GOTHIC

A cinephile from a very early age, Hooper must have understood the associations connecting *Salem’s Lot* with *Psycho*’s updating of the Old Dark House trope established by James Whale’s *The Old Dark House*, as well as the influence



Figure 4.2. Mark Petrie (Lance Kerwin) investigating the decrepit interior of the Marsten House, a decidedly abject version of the Old Dark House trope in American Gothic cinema. *Salem's Lot* (Tobe Hooper, CBS, 1979).

of earlier Hitchcock films that combined horror and melodrama. Barlow and Straker's stealthy infestation of Salem's Lot echoes the arrival of Uncle Charlie, the "vampiric" family member that fascinates and repulses his niece and doppelganger, Young Charlie, in Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). James Mason's Mr. Straker in *Salem's Lot* casts a similar shadow of sinister sophistication, and the Marsten House and the evil associated with it hold a hypnotic appeal over young Mark Petrie, Ben Mears, and Susan Norton. Hitchcock's precedent perhaps explains Straker's later enigmatic response inside the Marsten House to Mark's question, referring to Susan, who has gone to investigate the house and disappeared: "What did you do to her?" Straker replies, "I have taken her to where she wished to go." In their obsessive investigations of the Marsten House, Ben and Susan appear to be potential willing victims of inexpressible dark desires, in much the same way that Young Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt* seeks to escape her small-town ennui via the perverse influence of her Uncle Charlie.⁶

Like *Psycho*, *Salem's Lot* contains two significant buildings representing entrepreneurial struggles with the American Gothic past: the Marsten House and the antique shop owned by Barlow and Straker. Both evoke the Bates house and motel, particularly Norman's curatorial parlor, though the Marsten House's interior is far more straightforwardly abject in appearance than the almost museum-like quality of the tidy Bates house and motel parlor in Hitchcock's



Figure 4.3. Bill Norton (Ed Flanders) meets his fate in *Salem's Lot*, in a scene alluding to the death of Pam in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, CBS, 1979).

film (fig. 4.2). The Marsten House's crumbling spaces feature echoes of the decaying excremental interior of *Texas Chain Saw*'s Sawyer home, with its proliferation of feathers, detritus, and human and nonhuman animal bones. The *Salem's Lot* teleplay describes the Marsten House this way: "A chamber—or chambers—of horror. Those grotesque examples of the taxidermist's art glare at us everywhere. Debris, detritus, garbage strewn everywhere (You get the *feeling* that there is shit all over the place . . .) furniture, is gutted, broken. Plaster has fallen from the ceilings, revealing the slats, and paint and wallpaper peeled from the walls" (Monash 1979, 290–291).

Like *Psycho*'s Mrs. Bates, Barlow can be found in a root cellar, the "bowels" of the house, where he is provided for by his devoted "partner," Straker. Mrs. Bates's reference to a "fruit cellar" and being "fruity" is perhaps even more relevant in this context of male partnership. Further associations with *Psycho* include the decrepit taxidermy bench that Mark passes, described in the teleplay as "laden with the tools of taxidermy. Birds and rodents in varying stages of completion stare up at him" (Monash 1979, 171). By contrast, Straker's antique shop is a model of decorum. Its grand opening is introduced by musical motifs in Harry Sukman's score that are strongly evocative of Bernard Herrmann's music for *Psycho*.

In an overhead shot resembling Hitchcock's framing of Arbogast in *Psycho*, Susan's father, Bill Norton, ascends the Marsten House's staircase. A door

opens, and Straker advances toward Norton, lifts him, and impales him on a set of mounted antlers (fig. 4.3), an action resembling Leatherface's dispatch of Pam in *Texas Chain Saw*. In this brief sequence, the director acknowledges the work of his predecessor but changes it to display his reworking of a past tradition with reference to his own pioneering work. Not surprisingly, Hooper ends *Salem's Lot* with an image familiar to viewers of *Psycho* and *Texas Chain Saw*. As the camera pans up to the night sky, we see a full moon. Echoing the brief merging of Mrs. Bates's skull over Norman's face, Hooper cross-fades a skull image with the moon itself. If Hitchcock intended this imagery to suggest that his audience could not easily dismiss Norman as fully contained by the psychiatrist's circumscribed diagnosis in *Psycho*'s penultimate scene, Hooper does the same here, visually echoing Ben Mears's final line in the teleplay, "There'll be others," to suggest that the horror will continue and that the dark heritage of the past will always threaten America.

PEYTON PLACE: OUR KIND OF TOWN

In Tony Earnshaw's (2014b) edited collection of essays on *Salem's Lot*, many of those interviewed refer to *Peyton Place*. These include Stephen King, who also mentions Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (31); the producer Richard Kobritz, who refers to Paul Monash's script as "Peyton Place turning into vampires" (47); and Hooper, whose comments also allude to certain elements in *Eggshells*: "I always saw it as Peyton Place that was drawing some kind of bad energy, in particular from the Marsten House. Some kind of negative monolith or something in that particular area" (80).⁷ Like the 1957 film and 1964–1969 television versions of Grace Metalious's 1956 novel about a small town with dark secrets, Hooper's version of King's work is discrete in its handling of the seedier aspects of the story. All that can be explicitly revealed is the adulterous affair between the real estate agent Larry Crockett and Bonnie Sawyer, Weasel's alcoholism, and the homoeroticism-homophobia attending both the Barlow/Straker partnership and Ann Norton's initial suspicions when she learns about Ben Mears's "unmanly" profession as a writer. Like many shocked Americans who condemned *Peyton Place* without reading it, Susan Norton's mother, Ann, is a beacon of sexual repression, appalled at any explicit literary representation of sexuality. Her father is much more outgoing and has the potential to be a philanderer like Crockett. As the teleplay ironically notes, "If he were an urban physician he'd probably be dumping Ann for his young receptionist; in *Salem's Lot* he goes to church" (Monash 1979, 22).

Barlow's vampire attacks evoke what lies beneath the repressed façade of the town's inhabitants, particularly involving the eruption of sexualized taboos

such as homosexuality, and taboo sexual energies such as incest. This is something that Kobritz elaborates upon in his 2006 interview with Earnshaw. After mentioning King's comment about "*Our Town* turning into vampires," Kobritz states:

But I think it [*Salem's Lot*] really was *Peyton Place*. Everybody's got a dark, dirty little secret in their past. The town is cloistered and is waiting to explode in its own gossip and, all of a sudden, a vampire and the man that precedes him enter the town. Because of their arrival they expose all that's wrong with the town. So I do think that.

All of those characters have little secrets and it's very much *Peyton Place*. (Earnshaw 2014b, 171–172)⁸

Significantly, following Barlow's arrival, Salem's Lot becomes plagued by vampire attacks in ways that suggest the "lurid" topics of incest and homosexuality. The vampiric Ralphie Glick begs his brother, Danny, to let him in through his sibling's bedroom window in a scene that teases the viewer; Ralphie returns to bite Danny, once again suggestively, on the neck while he is in the hospital. Later, the vampiric Danny rises shockingly from his coffin for a lingering bite on the gravedigger Mike Ryerson's neck—a shot that Hooper freezes provocatively before the inevitable fadeout to commercial. Their mother, Marjorie, subsequently, protests a little too much in wanting to be reunited with her "lost boys." Ryerson, also turned into a vampire, exhibits certain deep feelings for Jason Burke when he arranges a nighttime encounter in Burke's bedroom. And Eva, her death shroud a revealing nightgown, appears about to kiss Susan before repression pulls her back (in a scene that does not appear in the original teleplay). These moments, combined with others involving Ned Tebbets, Nolly Gardner, and the suggestive pairing of Barlow and Straker in a partnership about more than just the selling of antiques, are subtle hints that went as far as American television would allow Hooper to go at the time.

In the television soap opera based on *Peyton Place*, Selena Cross—a victim of an incestuous assault by her stepfather, and a character whom Metalious derived from an actual incident—does not appear. But her presence vicariously returns with a vengeance in *Salem's Lot* in the multiple vampire transformations within families, committed in service to Barlow. One critic significantly suggests that Metalious's mother-dominated Norman Page (sanitized in Russ Tamblyn's character in the 1957 film version) may have influenced the Norman Bates of Robert Bloch's novel *Psycho* (McDermott 2000). All these characters fulfill Metalious's original definition of "strange things" crawling out from under a rock. Barlow's arrival in *Salem's Lot* unleashes repressed desires on the

part of his victims. Susan goes willingly to her appointment with Barlow, showing no desire to struggle against Straker. Significantly, brief looks exchanged between Ben and Mark before their collaboration suggest a homoerotic angle, as does their future role as fugitive partners on the road, ironically a kind of counterdoubling of the Barlow-Straker relationship.

Following the South American prologue that introduces Ben and Mark in close quarters—a sequence that closes, rather than opens (as does *Eaten Alive*), with Hooper's favorite visual symbol, a full moon—Hooper dissolves to the Marsten House. Ben Mears arrives by day, steps out of his jeep, and looks intensely at the house, his draw to this abject space suggestive of the obsessive behaviors in the American Gothic of Poe or Hawthorne. Though we learn later that Ben experienced a haunting vision of the supernatural in the house years before, little of that past is indicated in either the teleplay or film to give a deeper meaning to his fascination, other than as subject matter for a novel he plans to write. We do not know what happened to him inside the Marsten House many years earlier, whether supernatural experience or physical molestation. Like Kirk and Pam in *Texas Chain Saw*, Ben is hypnotized by the image of the old house, but unlike them, he lives to tell the tale. Ben's fascination with the supernatural is one he shares with Mark, who has a room filled with posters and models from Hollywood horror films.⁹ Mark's obsessive knowledge of horror saves him from vampire assault, and it, along with his sensitive, empathetic attitude and his struggles with a father who does not understand his obsessions, is among the factors that isolate or "queer" him.

What attracts Straker and Barlow to this small town? Ben supplies the explanation to his former teacher Jason Burke in the town restaurant: "Everything in Salem's Lot connects to that house. You can see it from every part of town. It's like a beacon throwing off energy forces." Ben's comment evokes not only the old house in *Eggshells*, with its malevolent "energy force" inhabiting the basement and consuming its young victims at the end, but also John Winthrop's definition of the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a "city on a hill" shining its light on the rest of the world, an early example of the American exceptionalism later used to dominate the world, and a favorite metaphor of conservative politicians.¹⁰ Yet the Marsten House, and by implication America, is already contaminated and has been from its first day of existence, as William S. Burroughs notes in *The Naked Lunch*: "America is not a young land: it is old and dirty and evil before the settlers, before the Indians." He adds, "The evil is there waiting" ([1959] 1991, 12). In *Salem's Lot*, the Old Dark House is the key energy center of the vampire plague, just as the Sawyer family home in *Texas Chain Saw* is the central location for a group of unemployed slaughterhouse workers who lie in

wait to cannibalize their young victims. In his earlier meeting with Burke, Ben comments on his belief that “an evil house attracts evil men” and that an object can be “inherently evil,” such as the house, which is “evil in its stone foundations, its wooden beams, the glass of its windows, even the plaster of its ceilings . . . evil” (Monash 1979, 61). Barlow and Straker embody that evil and bring it out into the open.

Driving to Salem’s Lot after confronting the vampirized Marjorie Glick, Dr. Norton asks Ben why Barlow and Straker chose the town. Ben replies, “Because you’re somewhat isolated here . . . somewhat inbred . . . full blooded. Barlow has wandered for centuries finding new places to victimize.” Ben’s lines are significant, since they encompass not only the small-town isolation represented by *Peyton Place* (and *Our Town*), but also possible issues of incest ignored by the townspeople in the past and in the present, as seen in the figure of Selena in Metalious’s novel. Ironically, an already contaminated America becomes fertile territory for Barlow and Straker’s version of a New World in their dark version of Manifest Destiny. The end of *Salem’s Lot* suggests no sense of definitive closure; though Barlow and Straker perish, their now-undead victims live on.

NOTES

1. Hooper was fired nine days into shooting.
2. The moment offers a faint hint of the type of grotesque, absurd humor seen in Hooper’s *The Heisters* (1964), a short parody of Hammer films and Roger Corman’s Poe adaptations.
3. Faulk (1913–1990) was an Austin radio host, writer, and storyteller who was blacklisted after a profiteering McCarthyist organization labeled him a communist. Faulk sued for libel and won, and his subsequent book about the experience, *Fear on Trial* (1963), was in 1975 made into a television movie starring William Devane and George C. Scott. Faulk’s casting as the “Storyteller” in *Chain Saw*, therefore, has significant sociopolitical resonance.
4. Thus, making this yet another entry in Hooper’s oeuvre tracing the disillusionment of youth.
5. As denoted in the refrain of David Hess’s theme song to another Vietnam-influenced horror film, *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972).
6. *Shadow of a Doubt*, the only screenplay written by Thornton Wilder, author of *Our Town* (1938), influenced both Stephen King’s novel and Larry Cohen’s film sequel, *A Return to Salem’s Lot* (1987).
7. Ironically, the scenarist Monash was the creator and executive producer of the TV series *Peyton Place* but disliked the novel, which he regarded as “a negativistic attack on the town written by someone who knew the town well and hated it” (Cameron 2015, 181). For another recognition of the links with *Peyton Place*, see John Kenneth Muir ([2002] 2015, 145).
8. In the postwar era, incest became one of those many suppressed “little secrets,” as in the 1947 Barbara Roberts tragedy that influenced the case of Selena Cross in *Peyton Place* (Cameron 2015, 38–53).

9. As Kristopher Woofert notes in this volume, *The Funhouse*'s young Joey Harper, *Poltergeist*'s (1982) Robbie Freeling, and *Invaders from Mars*'s (1986) David Gardner turned their bedrooms into genre-film shrines.

10. Significantly, when visiting Crockett's real estate business in search of a house to rent, Ben inquires about that "house *on the hill* . . . ?" (emphasis added). John Winthrop used the phrase "city on a hill" in a sermon in 1630 (Winthrop [1892] 2011).

FEEDING THE INDUSTRIAL MONSTER

A Critical Reconsideration of Tobe Hooper's *The Mangler*

CARL H. SEDERHOLM

FOR CRITICS AND CASUAL VIEWERS alike, *The Mangler* (1995) typically marks a low point for Tobe Hooper. Even though the director singlehandedly redefined the horror genre with *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and expanded his reputation by directing the popular television miniseries *Salem's Lot* (1979) and the blockbuster hit *Poltergeist* (1982), *The Mangler* seemed little more than yet another entry in a series of late-career missteps. To bolster this narrative of Hooper's supposed fall from grace, some critics began pointing to what they saw as early signs of trouble. Specifically, they turned to long-gestating rumors about Steven Spielberg controlling Hooper's direction on the set of *Poltergeist*, rumors that raised questions not only about Hooper's long-term prospects but also about the nature of cinematic authorship generally (Leeder 2008). Critics also pointed to Hooper's subsequent big-budget projects for Cannon Films—*Lifeforce* (1985), *Invaders from Mars* (1986), and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986), none of which performed well at the box office. By the time Hooper released *The Mangler*, his first major film release since *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, critics seemed primed for a flop—and they got one. As Simon Brown explains, *The Mangler* “was a disaster in cinemas, taking in a little more than \$1 million at the US box office and disappearing after only a week” (2018, 144). Was this also a sign that the genius behind *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* had little left to offer?

Critics dismissed *The Mangler* as shoddy and disgusting, a film so bad that it would disappoint even the B-horror crowd. John Kenneth Muir ([2002] 2015, 128–129) cites several such critical attacks. David Kronke, writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, described Hooper's movie as “a glum, lackluster affair” that should have been called “The Bungler.” The *Washington Post*'s Richard Harrington called the film “ludicrous from start to finish,” a “debacle.” Similarly, Leah Rozen, in her review for *People*, suggested that audiences “should

be ashamed" to see this movie, especially those young voyeurs eager to catch the spectacle of bodies getting twisted, crushed, and consumed by a mechanical monster.

Film critics were not the only ones who took *The Mangler* to task. Stephen King criticized the film as a botched and confusing experience. In an interview with Tony Magistrale, King admitted that he had concerns from the outset: "I knew it wasn't a good idea. The screenwriter that [Hooper] selected looked like a college sophomore, but he was awfully eager for the chance, and you never know what someone like Tobe Hooper is going to do" (Magistrale 2003, 10). Elsewhere, King wrote, "The film version of 'The Mangler' is energetic and colorful, but it's also a mess with Robert (Freddy Krueger) Englund stalking through it for reasons which remain unclear to me even now" (2009, 58). King added that even though he appreciated the film's effective set design, "the story got lost" in the overall presentation (58). Tellingly, King concluded that the film was a major step down for the director. As he put it, "Tobe Hooper, who directed [*The Mangler*], is something of a genius . . . *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* proves that beyond doubt. But when genius goes wrong, brother, watch out" (2009, 58; ellipsis in the original). For King and movie critics alike, Tobe Hooper seemed destined to be measured solely against his breakout film.

Such perspectives are not terribly surprising; Robert Bloch was so commonly referred to as "the author of *Psycho*" that he quickly grew to resent it (Larson 1986, 77). Similarly, Orson Welles consistently had to address concerns that most of his films after *Citizen Kane* were considered flawed masterpieces, signs that his initial success could be attributed only to a nice blend of youthful luck and daring combined with a major-studio budget (Naremore 2015, 19–20). Hooper's own story is not much different. As an audacious young talent, he took the film world by storm, quickly rose in popularity—indeed, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* was screened at the Director's Fortnight at the 1975 Cannes film festival—only to (apparently) fall further from grace with each subsequent effort. While Hooper's output might seem inconsistent, squeezing it into a preformulated narrative of rise, loss, and decline is not very useful. Like Bloch and Welles before him, Hooper continued to produce a variety of challenging projects, many of which he developed in his own way and on his own terms. Although critics and audiences did not always appreciate those efforts, Hooper continued to defy expectations, including those coming from people hoping for *Texas Chain Saw* redux.

Part of the problem is that some critics still do not completely understand how to frame horror films, especially according to genre theory. As Peter Hutchings points out, "If one looks at the way that film critics and film historians have written about horror, a certain imprecision becomes apparent regarding how

the genre is actually constituted" (2004, 1). Such imprecision is particularly evident in the way critics have approached Hooper's career. For them, *Texas Chain Saw* represents a triumph of horror filmmaking, whereas his other films are dismissible as uneven or, in the case of *The Mangler*, a shoddy mess, seemingly without purpose. But that kind of thinking assumes that Hooper was simply going through the motions in his later films rather than taking on horror projects tied to his own creative (and potentially subversive) ends. Rather than place limits on the kinds of things horror can accomplish, we must think more about its larger discursive possibilities. Not all horror movies accomplish the same creative ends. Rick Altman makes this point: "Genres are not inert categories shared by all . . . , but discursive claims made by real speakers for particular purposes in specific situations. Even when the details of the discourse situation remain hidden, and thus the purpose veiled, we nevertheless do well to assume that generic references play a part in an overall discursive strategy" (quoted in Hutchings 2004, 8).

Reconsidering *The Mangler*, especially in the context of Hooper's total career, requires that we do something more than rehearse the film's apparent flaws; movie critics have already had their say and taken their predictable potshots. *The Mangler* benefits from consideration specifically in relation to Hooper's larger discursive interest in raising key questions about American labor conditions, moral compromise, and profit at any cost. Like several other Hooper films, including *Texas Chain Saw* and *Poltergeist*, *The Mangler* examines, often through extended symbolism, the long-term consequences of grasping for money and power in America. If these topics remain overlooked, *The Mangler* will never be completely understood, let alone appreciated.

If critics have treated *The Mangler* as a sign of Hooper's ongoing decline, they likely also ignored it because of its connections with Stephen King. Even though King is one of the most popular authors in the world, films based on his work have traditionally not fared well within academic film criticism. As Magistrale argues, film critics have routinely been "prejudicial and deliberately exclusionary" when it comes to Stephen King, the main exceptions coming from scholars interested in the careers of auteur filmmakers such as Brian De Palma, Stanley Kubrick, or David Cronenberg (2008, 5). Critics have willingly given their attention to films such as *Carrie* (1976), *The Shining* (1980), and *The Dead Zone* (1983), but many more King adaptations remain ignored, among them *Maximum Overdrive* (Stephen King, 1986), *The Running Man* (Paul Michael Glaser, 1987), *Pet Sematary* (Mary Lambert, 1989; Kevin Kölsch and Dennis Widmyer, 2019), *Thinner* (Tom Holland, 1996), and *Dreamcatcher* (Lawrence Kasdan, 2003). Although critics such as Magistrale (2003, 2008), Simon Brown (2018), and Mark Browning (2009) have done much to address

this general neglect, much work remains to be done if we want to understand the still-expanding body of King-related adaptations.

When *The Mangler* appeared in 1995, it faced at least two significant challenges. The first, as Simon Brown points out, was that audience interest in King adaptations was nowhere as strong in the mid-1990s as it had been in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Brown 2018, 42). Although a film such as *The Shawshank Redemption* (Frank Darabont, 1994) is now considered one of the most popular films of all time, it failed to attract large crowds during its theatrical run.¹ Fortunately, the film found an appreciative audience through cable and the home-video market and through word of mouth. If audiences had failed initially to appreciate Frank Darabont's character-driven film about hope, redemption, and a successful prison break, they were even less likely to embrace the darker—and much more violent—tale of a possessed industrial speed ironer and folder with a taste for virgin blood.

The second challenge facing *The Mangler* was its potentially laughable premise. Marc Shapiro, in his profile of *The Mangler* for *Fangoria*, attests that the story is “admittedly one of King's slightest and silliest tales” (1995, 20). To be fair, a story about a police detective discovering that a terrible industrial accident was actually caused by the aforementioned possessed speed ironer and folder certainly puts at risk the audience's ability to suspend disbelief. And yet King's original story, based in part on his own experience of working around potentially deadly machines, works pretty well as a horror tale about a possessed factory machine running amok. Like two other stories published in *Night Shift* (1978)—“Children of the Corn” and “Jerusalem's Lot”—“The Mangler” explores what happens when naïve characters encounter situations beyond their comprehension. In the story, Detective Hunton eventually accepts the idea that “a devil had taken over the inanimate steel and cogs and gears of the mangler and had turned it into something with its own life” (Stephen King 1978, 88). And yet he is unable to stop it from killing his best friend and getting loose in the community. The story's final line, “It was already out,” shows his powerlessness (92). He solves the mystery, but cannot do anything to stop it.

Within King studies, “The Mangler” largely appears only as an example of many such tales of technology gone awry or, as in Heidi Strengell's *Dissecting Stephen King*, an example of stories featuring terrible work conditions (2006, 106). It is therefore surprising that King scholars have given such significant attention to the film. In their book-length studies of Stephen King films, both Tony Magistrale and Simon Brown comment on *The Mangler's* context, legacy, and major themes. Magistrale opens his discussion by conceding that even though *The Mangler* “cannot be called a great film,” there is nevertheless something in its Gothic atmosphere, its overall set design, and its ostensibly

“misogynistic subtext” that warrants greater attention (2003, 162, 164). Magistrale argues that rather than reproducing misogyny on any level, the film investigates the problems associated with a nearly all-female labor force clearly being exploited and abused by male leaders. Contrary to King’s story, in the film, women perform all the significant, dangerous physical labor in the factory, unaware that one of them is also marked for human sacrifice. By contrast, as Magistrale points out, all the male employees either “occupy managerial status or work safely at the perimeters of the speed iron” (2008, 163). For Magistrale, Hooper’s decision to feature an all-female workforce inside the Blue Ribbon Laundry highlights the film’s larger subtext concerning the ways that men profit directly from the exploitation of women (2008, 163). As Magistrale puts it, the machine at the heart of the film is “both at the literal center of the masculine alliance that controls both the town and the laundry and the embodiment of its most aggressively antifeminine principles: The machine feeds off women—their domestic labor as well as their blood—as do the human males who likewise profit from their work” (164). Magistrale refers to the actual shedding of blood and not to conventional notions of blood, sweat, and tears. By adding a subplot concerning human sacrifice to the film, Hooper comments on how far some men will go to maintain power.

Magistrale points to the film’s literary parallels, particularly stories by Charles Dickens or Thomas Hardy that also comment on the ways “humans have become enslaved to the primitive internal combustion machines that they must serve” (2008, 163). In that light, *The Mangler* may also profitably be compared to American Gothic fiction concerning exploited factory workers. Given the film’s emphasis on the plight of female employees, *The Mangler* recalls Herman Melville’s “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” (1855). The latter section of this two-part tale is concerned specifically with the plight of female workers as they labor in an industrial, mechanized paper factory. In a memorable passage, Melville laments the irony that the workers are “their own executioners; themselves whetting the very swords that slay them” ([1855] 2001, 162).² Similarly, in the film’s mechanized setting, “the omnipresent sound of machinery competes against the groans of female laborers who toil among dirty linen and the tyrannical exhortations of the shop’s foreman, George Stanner (Demetre Phillips) and the laundry’s brutal owner Bill Gartley (Robert England)” (Magistrale 2008, 163). Magistrale’s comment captures the overall dynamic of the film: women do all the work while men yell at them to stay on task. According to Magistrale’s reading, Hooper unmasks specifically the kinds of power structures that victimize women.

Like Magistrale, Simon Brown acknowledges the film’s problems but is also quick to point out that it “is well designed and executed as a horror film” (2018,

146). Brown's media history approach to *The Mangler* provides a much-welcome context for the film, particularly for evaluating the film's long-term reception and the unlikely way this box-office bomb eventually spawned a franchise. As Brown characterizes it, the film's afterlife represents a significant moment in understanding King adaptations: "*The Mangler* represents the apotheosis of this particular type of low-budget King film, totally distinct from the bigger-budget mainstream product and, through the Unrated edition, aimed more at horror fans watching at home than multiplex cinemagoers" (146). Significantly, the "director's cut" gives home audiences a few extra moments of gore (145). After years of availability only on VHS and DVD, Shout! Factory, a company invested in supporting independent (and often underappreciated) films, released *The Mangler* as a high-quality Blu-ray in late 2018, thus giving audiences another opportunity to reconsider the film.

Both Magistrale and Brown expand our understanding of *The Mangler* by providing a series of questions and concerns through which it can be reevaluated. My approach builds on their work by showing not only how we can turn our attention to the film's treatment of women, but also how that treatment brings up larger questions relating to labor conditions, corporate greed, and the human cost of success. More to the point, Hooper's not-so-subtle symbolism shows audiences just how bad things really are.

LABOR MAKES YOU FREE

Part of Hooper's critical reputation stems from a marked ability to exploit cinematic techniques to suggest more blood and gore than he actually depicts. The most commonly noted example of this skill comes from the infamous moment in *Texas Chain Saw* when Leatherface impales Pam on a meat hook. Through careful blocking and editing, Hooper shocked audiences with a moment they remembered as bloodier and more explicit than the one they actually witnessed (Zinoman 2011, 140). Although there is no exact equivalent of the meat hook in *The Mangler*, Hooper introduces into the set design an expression so fraught with meaning that the words alone suggest far more than they show. This is because the words on the sign—"Labor Makes You Free"—must be understood as a translation of the infamous German expression "Arbeit Macht Frei," best known for being displayed at or near the gates of multiple Nazi concentration camps. To this day, the "Arbeit Macht Frei" sign, particularly the one at Auschwitz, resonates as a symbol of Nazi duplicity, violence, and anti-Semitism. Scholars sometimes refer to it as the Jewish equivalent of the inscription marking the pathway into Dante's hell: "Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here" (Stier 2015, 69). Because "Arbeit Macht Frei" has so long been associated with

Nazi death camps, Hooper's version of it cannot be read simply as a workplace slogan. In any context, the sign is a vicious deception, a piece of propaganda that appears to offer the possibility of freedom while forever holding it back. As Oren Baruch Stier explains, the sign could never make good on its promise because "according to Nazi ideology, Jews were not classified as people who *could* work, and they were also not eligible to earn freedom *through* work" (75). No wonder, as Stier points out, the sign has come to "symbolize . . . the Shoah in its entirety" for many Holocaust survivors: it captures a significant component of the history, trauma, terror, anti-Semitism, and death of that time (68–69).

In *The Mangler*, Hooper introduces an American version of "Arbeit Macht Frei" inside the Blue Ribbon Laundry to lend symbolic weight to broader themes of local conspiracies, workplace exploitation, and horrific violence. Even though the mangler is supposed to take center stage in this film, the words "Labor Makes You Free" represent the central irony of its awful purpose. In this sense, the sign may be understood figuratively as a synecdoche for any circumstance in which workers are exploited for their time, their labor, their blood, and—ultimately—their bodies. Put another way, "Labor Makes You Free" signifies any circumstance in which people are reduced to commodities whose sole purpose is to serve (and sometimes to feed) the machine. But these bodies not only serve the mangler; they also maintain the larger power structures evident within the factory, enforced by the characters George Stanner and Bill Gartley, and within the surrounding community. The connection between life and what might be called violent consumption also appears in Hooper's adaptation of *Salem's Lot* in the way that Kurt Barlow and Richard Straker insinuate themselves in the town through the guise of setting up an antique store, even though they are simultaneously preying on the townsfolk for their blood.

While the "Labor Makes You Free" sign makes only a brief appearance, Hooper takes advantage of this dark and bloody intertext to suggest not only the blatant disregard of human life in the Blue Ribbon Laundry but also the inherent ties between sacrifice and profit that operate throughout the film. Viewers catch their first glimpse of these ties in the tense moments between Sherry Ouelette cutting her hand on the mangler—thereby spilling her blood into its gears—and Mrs. Frawley getting crushed by it. Close-up shots of Sherry's blood dripping into the mangler prime audiences to expect not only that the machine has a taste for blood but also that its next victim will suffer more than just a bad cut. Given that machines typically need plenty of oil to keep operating, Hooper's association between blood and oil ties back to his long-term interest in the exploitation and displacement of the working class for corporate interests.

Just a few moments later, Hooper symbolically connects Sherry with the



Figure 5.1. Sherry Ouellette (Vanessa Pike) noticing that her hand is bleeding as she stands beneath a motivational sign in *The Mangler* (Tobe Hooper, New Line Cinema, 1995).

portentous slogan. After cutting her hand, Sherry leaves the factory floor to attend to her wound. Shaken by her accident—and by the foreman’s lack of concern for it—Sherry enters a break room with “Labor Makes You Free” emblazoned on a sign across the archway. Rather than follow Sherry into that space, Hooper leaves the camera still, thereby keeping the focus on the sign and its placement. As Sherry exits the break room, she pauses in front of the sign and it appears to curve across the crown of her head, forming an uncanny halo (fig. 5.1). Given that Bill Gartley, the factory’s owner and Sherry’s legal guardian, intends to sacrifice her to the mangler, the symbolic connection between her body and the sign captures her status as a potential scapegoat. Hooper underscores this point by juxtaposing shots of Sherry standing beneath the sign with close-ups of her freshly bleeding wound, suggesting not only the connections between trauma and power inside the Blue Ribbon Laundry, but also a stigmatic connection between her body and the machine.

The Blue Ribbon Laundry offers fear instead of hope, bondage instead of freedom, and death instead of prosperity. Employees work relentlessly in harsh conditions where the risks are many and the rewards few.³ Hooper establishes this point from the opening shot, which shows the laundry foreman, Stanner, standing on a walkway above the factory floor, shouting at his employees. His job is to keep everyone on task because, not surprisingly, the factory is always running behind schedule. To emphasize Stanner’s prominent factory role, Hooper shoots him from below, suggesting that he looms above his employees, an ever-present reminder of their subordinate status. In another low-angle shot,

Hooper places Stanner in the center, a perspective that also offers a glimpse of the factory's overwhelming size. Curiously, it also gives the impression that Stanner himself is nearly engulfed by the industrial-style walls and ceiling. In one instance, the position of Stanner's head, tilted forward and down, suggests that the factory is always pressing down on him. Like the other employees, Stanner is never truly free, even though he works from a privileged position.

For Hooper to appropriate a sign like "Arbeit Macht Frei"—and to wrench it far out of context—risks seeming blunt and heavy-handed, but what it lacks in subtlety it makes up for in symbolism. Hooper delights in provoking audiences, especially when doing so allows him to shed light on the exploited and the displaced. In fact, Hooper deepens this connection by keeping King's name for the factory (the Blue Ribbon Laundry) intact. For over a century, the expression "Blue Ribbon," an anglicization of "Blue Riband," or the award given to passenger liners that made the fastest crossing of the Atlantic, has been routinely used to signify the highest-quality products, whether beer, ice cream, or barbeque. By calling the factory the Blue Ribbon Laundry, Hooper evokes something of the broader American investment in ambition, hard work, and excellence. In that sense, the factory's overall status in the community appears as something to be trusted and supported. But given the violent and exploitative practices that occur within the factory, Hooper turns those same American values on their head, suggesting that they cover for a larger, more insidious system of exploitation and violence.

WELCOME TO RIKERS VALLEY

"Labor Makes You Free" is not the only sign fraught with meaning in *The Mangler*. Another appears in a seemingly inconsequential shot that shows a delivery truck transporting a possessed freezer from the Blue Ribbon Laundry to a residential area of town. On-screen, the truck travels from the lower-left corner of the shot, upward and to the right. On the left side of the road stands a typical small-town Christian church. As the truck passes the church, the camera pans to the right, away from the church, revealing a graveyard on the other side of the street. Since graveyards are frequently connected to churches, particularly in small towns, there is nothing surprising about the components of the shot. That changes, however, as the camera continues to pan, revealing a sign that reads, "Welcome to Rikers Valley, 'The Industrial Heart Of Maine.'"⁴ The camera rests on a close-up of the sign at screen right, allowing for both a good view of the sign and its proximity to the graveyard (fig. 5.2).

On the surface, the sign establishes the story's location. Until this point, viewers have received no indication of where the film takes place. And yet,



Figure 5.2. The town's welcome sign, overlooking a graveyard, suggesting the connection between death and industry in Rikers Valley, in *The Mangler* (Tobe Hooper, New Line Cinema, 1995).

given Hooper's highly symbolic use of the "Labor Makes You Free" sign, it would not be surprising if the welcome sign were also meant to signal his larger critical interests. Given the sign's placement just above a graveyard, Hooper connects death directly with Rikers Valley. In this light, even the town's motto—"The Industrial Heart Of Maine"—lends additional meaning to this point, precisely because it stands adjacent to a graveyard. Hooper's strategic juxtaposition of graveyards and houses is a fairly regular occurrence in his films. *Poltergeist's* Cuesta Verde was built on a cemetery—and has another cemetery looming over it on a nearby hill. Similarly, numerous shots in *Salem's Lot* show that the town sits beneath a graveyard set atop a nearby hill. *The Mangler* repeats the trope. Rather than show viewers a sign next to a landscape of buildings, industrial plants, and smokestacks, Hooper provides a seemingly idyllic view pockmarked by obvious symbols of death. The implication is clear: death is an essential part of what keeps Rikers Valley's industrial heart beating.

DEATH AND PROFITS

This is not the first time Tobe Hooper developed thematic connections between death and the economy in his films. One of the biggest twists in *Poltergeist* depends on understanding just how troubling the ties between economic success and a lack of respect for human life really can be. In his discussion of *Poltergeist*, Douglas Kellner explains that the film "articulates class fears that a greedy and ruthless capitalist class will stop at nothing to pursue development

and profit, destroying the environment, community, and family life in the wake of a relentless capitalist modernity" (1996, 227). In one crucial scene, the real estate developer Mr. Teague, concerned that Steve Freeling is planning to leave his company, offers to make him a partner in the business. Teague sweetens the deal by showing Steve a prime spot of land for building a new family home, one with a beautiful view of a nearby valley. When Steve objects that the adjacent graveyard would prevent him from building a pool, Teague explains that the company already owns the land and is going to relocate the graveyard, something it did years before while developing Cuesta Verde. Against Steve's further objections, Teague counters by suggesting that the land is not "an ancient tribal burial ground" and that the bodies do not necessarily have any meaning. In Teague's justifying expression, they are "just . . . people." When Steve later realizes that his life-threatening paranormal experiences stem directly from the company's actions—it moved only the headstones, not the bodies—he is furious. The company's lack of respect for human life (and death) in the name of profit is directly responsible for unleashing the supernatural forces at play in Cuesta Verde.

Although *The Mangler* and *Poltergeist* may not seem closely connected at first, the "Welcome to Rikers Valley" sign should be read not only as a thematic nod to *Poltergeist*'s morally compromised Cuesta Verde, but also as a sign that similar acts of exploitation and greed are occurring in Rikers Valley. As he did in *Poltergeist* and, later, *Mortuary* (2005), Hooper develops in *The Mangler* a subtext concerning the long-term consequences of exchanging (or sacrificing) human bodies in the name of economic success. By the end of the film, viewers learn that Rikers Valley is effectively run by a cabal of people (presumably led by Bill Gartley) who are willing to sacrifice parts of their own bodies to the mangler so that they can maintain their positions of power and prestige. In one shocking moment, the town doctor waves to Detective Hunton, revealing that he is missing a finger. Hunton learns why that missing finger is significant primarily through a document left for him by the enigmatic character J. J. Pictureman. According to Pictureman, "The old-timers in Rikers Valley had a saying . . . Beware of people with missing parts. There's a piece of each of them in the demon and a dose of the demon in each of them." "Missing parts" refers to the physical signs that someone has offered a part of himself or herself to the machine, presumably in exchange for power or wealth. As Gartley admits, "There's a little bit of me in that machine and a little bit of it in me. We are the lifeblood of this town. . . . We all have to make sacrifices." Bill Gartley's body—his leg braces, his strange eyes, and his badly scarred face and neck—attests to just how much he believes in making regular flesh offerings to the machine. He admits to Detective Hunton that his connection with the machine dates to his

childhood and that he sees his deep connection with the machine as part of his family's legacy. As Melville wrote of the girls working in the paper factory, "Machinery—that vaunted slave of humanity—here stood menially served by human beings, who served mutely and cringingly as the slave serves the Sultan. The girls did not so much seem accessory wheels to the general machinery as mere cogs of the wheels" ([1855] 2001, 160). Although Gartley would doubtless see himself as something more than a cog, his ongoing willingness to cater to the machine suggests that he is trapped by his own ambitions.

Gartley and his cabal of powerbrokers in Rikers Valley willingly sacrifice parts of themselves to the machine, though the machine is never satisfied. Through the course of the film, Hooper reveals that Gartley has been preparing his sixteen-year-old ward, Sherry Ouelette, as a human sacrifice. Not surprisingly, Gartley never tells Sherry about her role in his plan; instead, he promises her that she will one day inherit his large collection of antique dolls. As always, Gartley's principal interest lies in exchanging goods for life.

To some extent, Gartley's determination to sacrifice Sherry underscores Magistrale's claim that the men in *The Mangler* collectively betray a "disdain toward women," one that will tolerate any amount of violence against them so long as it brings the men increased success and power (2003, 164). Gartley's disdain for other people makes it easier for him to attempt to sacrifice Sherry to the machine—a conceit facilitated by her acceptance of her role as victim because of his apparent kindness in giving her a job and a place to live. Like Teague in *Poltergeist*, not to mention Barlow and Straker in *Salem's Lot*, Gartley defines his world strictly as a place where financial gain requires others' sacrifice.

Gartley's beliefs rely on a quasi-religious set of assumptions that effectively blur distinctions between capitalism and religion. This is particularly clear in the moments leading up to Gartley's attempt to sacrifice Sherry to the mangler. He begins by invoking the machine as if it were a god eagerly waiting to receive—and reward—his sacrifice. In his words, "God of all machines, god that meshes good and evil . . . Accept this blood of my blood." Robert Englund delivers these first lines reverently, but quickly shifts into a Freddy Krueger-style delivery as he announces, "I am signing off. . . . Payment in full!" Given his rather comical delivery, Englund's line could be interpreted as just another throwaway one-liner. But within the larger thematic context of the film, Gartley's words suggest just how much he sees capitalism as a kind of religion, one that requires the willing sacrifice of one's body and mind to a machine, a classic symbol of American industry. As Gartley explained to Detective Hunton earlier in the film, Rikers Valley operates on the shared understanding—at least among elite men—that sacrifice brings power. In attempting to offer Sherry's body to the machine, Gartley thinks he will fulfill all his obligations and therefore achieve

the final blessing. What he fails to understand is that he has given so much of himself to the machine that there is very little human, or humanity, left in him.

Borrowing from Walter Benjamin, I suggest that the sacrificial aspects of *The Mangler* may be read as a willful blurring of religion and economics. Benjamin makes this point explicitly: "Capitalism essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish, and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion" (Benjamin [1921] 2005, 259). Implicit in Benjamin's point is that some human beings turn to economics to locate quasi-supernatural signs of status, favor, and a sense of transcendence. *The Mangler* explores Benjamin's ideas in its thematic interest in uncovering just how extensive and ritualized the connections between human life and the mechanisms of commerce really are. In that light, *The Mangler* could also be profitably compared with Stephen King's *It*, a novel that clearly explores the ways in which human beings tacitly allow the sacrifice of the innocent not simply to appease a monster but also to maintain the economic status quo. Pennywise, like the Mangler, keeps the city strong.

Even though *The Mangler* was a critical and box-office failure, it seems clear that there is much more to it than its detractors have suggested. Not only does the film resonate with the kinds of thematic interests that Hooper explored in films such as *Texas Chain Saw*, *Poltergeist*, and *Salem's Lot*, but it also raises significant questions about American labor conditions, the working classes, and the religious overtones of certain capitalist practices. Ultimately, Hooper's film addresses the overall price of power—and specifically how that price is exacted from the laboring classes, a theme that should resonate even more strongly with viewers living in an age of online corporations and their glittering promises of instant gratification via ever-faster delivery. Even the most alluring conveniences have a human cost, and *The Mangler* sheds light on that cost by showing that despite the machine's clearly awful penchant for human flesh, there are always willing individuals determined to keep it fed.

NOTES

1. For an insightful analysis of the afterlives of *The Shawshank Redemption*, including its rise in popularity and its fascinating connections with tourism, see the study by Maura Grady and Tony Magistrale (2018).

2. Even though *The Mangler* has clear thematic ties to Melville's "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," a literary text, it could also be alluding to Victor Halperin's film *White Zombie* (1932), particularly the factory sequence depicting Murder Legendre's group of zombie slaves feeding materials into a large series of gears. At one point, a zombie slave falls directly into those gears, but the rest of the workforce just keeps going, as if losing a body to the mechanism is a regular—or at least an insignificant—occurrence. My thanks to Kristopher Woofert and Will Dodson for making this connection for me. I am also grateful for their valuable input on several aspects of this paper.

3. *The Mangler's* critique of American labor conditions is arguably even more urgent today as debates continue to rage over working conditions in Amazon.com warehouses, industrial meat-processing plants, and clothing sweatshops, not to mention the awful conditions experienced by undocumented immigrants and outsourced slave labor.

4. Like the "Labor Makes You Free" sign and the symbol of the blue ribbon, the town's name, Rikers Valley, carries a rather pointed irony: it alludes to New York City's most infamous jail, Rikers Island.

UNSETTLED ARCHITECTURE AND AVANT-GARDE STRATEGIES IN TOBE HOOPER'S *DOWN FRIDAY STREET*, *TOOLBOX MURDERS*, AND *DJINN*

ANNE GOLDEN AND KRISTOPHER WOOFER

TOBE HOOPER'S FILMS HIGHLIGHT A persistent, even obsessive concern with anomalous, unsettled space. Seemingly living, shifting, or expanding structures can be found in films as disparate in production context and tone as *Eggshells* (1969), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *Poltergeist* (1982), *The Apartment Complex* (1999), and *Mortuary* (2005). These and other works highlight membranous frontiers demarcating compromised spaces and realities. In *Eggshells*, for example, such boundary markers come in the odd, titular, bubble-like manifestations that act as domes over the characters—a straightforward symbol that reads ambiguously as protection, isolation, and, possibly, suffocation. In *Texas Chain Saw*, it comes in the multiple images of skins stretched over surfaces often lit from behind, and in the infamous metal door separating the front hallway from the kitchen slaughterhouse—its clinical stainless-steel surface strikingly out of place in the otherwise conventional wood-and-plaster architecture of a farmhouse. And it finds its way into the architectural boundaries and borders separating reality and surreality in *Salem's Lot* (1979), *The Funhouse* (1981), *Poltergeist*, *Lifeforce* (1985), and others. Hooper's body of work shows a pervasive concern with such surfaces and structures, which collapse binaries such as inside-outside, private-public, and organic-inorganic.

Of particular interest here are three films that explore the notion of unsettled space through avant-garde strategies. *Down Friday Street* (1966), *Toolbox Murders* (2004), and *Djinn* (2013) appeared at distinctly different periods in Hooper's career, but they suggest architectural enhancements and disturbances that politicize space. In the earliest film, an experimental documentary, Hooper generates a sense of dread around civic degeneration by asserting an authorial presence in empty domestic spaces through aggressive camerawork, and by overlaying and intercutting images of late-capitalist commercial expansion, urban decay, and demolition with the suggestively more persistent presence

of nature. In *Toolbox Murders*, the central structure, the Lusman Arms—a decrepit hotel turned apartment building that is undergoing renovation—is a grim, treacherous space in transformation, haunted by a killer who is intrinsically linked with the architecture he ultimately serves by providing fresh, fleshly building materials. *Djinn*, Hooper’s final film, creates these kinds of uncanny disruptions in the way the fog-shrouded Al Hamra luxury apartment complex behaves as a malevolent force, improbably rising out of the constantly windswept Middle Eastern desert landscape like a towering monolith. Like the characters in *Toolbox*’s Lusman Arms, once inside *Djinn*’s Al Hamra, the film’s protagonists are alienated from conventional reality, isolated in a dreamlike, disorienting space.

Down Friday Street’s associational editing, canted angles, and creeping camera suggest spaces corrupted or uncannily compromised, and *Toolbox Murders* and *Djinn* continue Hooper’s wide-ranging strategy, seen in numerous images, of presenting blurred frontiers that suggest simultaneous spaces and realities. The avant-garde strategies that *Toolbox Murders* and *Djinn* carry forward from Hooper’s early documentary experiments in *Down Friday Street*—along with intertextual references to early Renaissance, modernist, and surrealist art—highlight a consistent trope in the director’s work, one in which space is politicized and ripe with potential revelations.

THE SPACE OF NIGHTMARE: LIMINALITY, DISCONTINUITY, CATEGORY CRISIS

This preoccupation with buildings as liminal spaces or frontiers—the veil that ties one world or reality to another—is intrinsic to the horror genre. The haunted house or structure is its key trope, a place where space and time are conflated and mutable. Anthony Vidler describes such an architectural uncanny as a “mingling of mental projection and spatial characteristics” related to feelings of cultural and individual anxiety and “estrangement” (1992, 12). And Renée Bergland identifies an American “national uncanny” in which haunted spaces stand as reminders of “the unsettled, the not-yet-colonized, the unsuccessfully colonized, or the decolonized” (2000, 11). Hooper investigates such “decolonized” spaces in his films, showing architecture in particular to be somehow in flux. From obviously compromised structures in works such as *Poltergeist* and *Salem’s Lot*, to the more suggestively disrupted space in his early films *Down Friday Street* and *Eggshells*, Hooper suffuses his cinema with locations that pulse with the potential to transform or reveal. Buildings, like bodies, hold secrets, and they change, decay, dematerialize. To these uncanny-realist senses of architecture, Hooper adds spaces that collapse object and flesh, such as the

closet that manifests a fleshy portal in *Poltergeist* or the unorthodox combination of human skin, bone, and teeth in the décor of the house at the center of *Texas Chain Saw*. Such unstable spaces relate to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's discussion of the "ontological liminality" of monsters, defining the monster as a "harbinger of category crisis" with a "propensity to shift" (Cohen 1996, 5, 6). In both *Toolbox Murders* and *Djinn*, this kind of ontological shifting comes in the meshing of flesh and structure, however metaphorical. In the former, the monster is both a figure (the killer, Coffin Baby) and the building. Similarly, in *Djinn*, the protagonist, Khalid, is bound to and possessed by the Al Hamra because it is built on the site of his birthplace.

Unsettled structures in these films become characters that monitor their subjects and, arguably, swallow them whole.¹ In *Down Friday Street*, Hooper uses a great deal of handheld-camera work to probe opulent domestic spaces, as if to unsettle not just these spaces of retreat from the outside world, but also the intentions or economics that went into creating such private fortresses, now made public for the viewer by Hooper's invasive *kino-eye*. In *Toolbox Murders*, a new tenant named Nell Barrows accidentally discovers a tin containing human teeth in a hole in a wall at the Lusman Arms.² This hole acts as a kind of portal, suggesting the building's link to flesh, later reinforced by the building's handyman, Ned, who hints at parallels between the Lusman Arms and structures partly built with bone: "A lot of black magic uses various body parts. The ancient Saxons built whole temples out of bones." The building appears decidedly animate. Plastic sheeting hung for the renovations seems to inhale and exhale as it flutters and bulges. Another character, Chas, a resident of the Lusman Arms for sixty years, claims, "The walls listen." In the more straightforwardly supernatural *Djinn*, this uncanny monitoring of intimate space includes the conventional manifestation of a dark presence on the ceiling to observe Khalid's wife, Salama, in their apartment, but receives an update in the similar monitoring by pervasive security cameras throughout the Al Hamra complex.

There is a correlation between the liminal spaces created in *Down Friday Street*, *Toolbox Murders*, and *Djinn* and what A. L. Rees calls "the discontinuity principle" in experimental film and video. For Rees, the "discontinuity principle underlies the avant-garde's key rhetorical figure, paratactic montage, which breaks the flow, or 'continuity,' between shots and scenes, against the grain of narrative editing" (1999, 49–50). Rees highlights theories of montage that focus on the transitional spaces of filmmaking. He notes Dziga Vertov's theory that the gaps or intervals between frames are as crucial as the contents of the frame, and cites Robert Musil's notion in "Notes Towards a Dramaturgy of Film" (1925) that film language "curves away" from reality without ever losing it, so that it is a "frontier between two worlds" (quoted in Rees 1999, 36). This cinematic focus

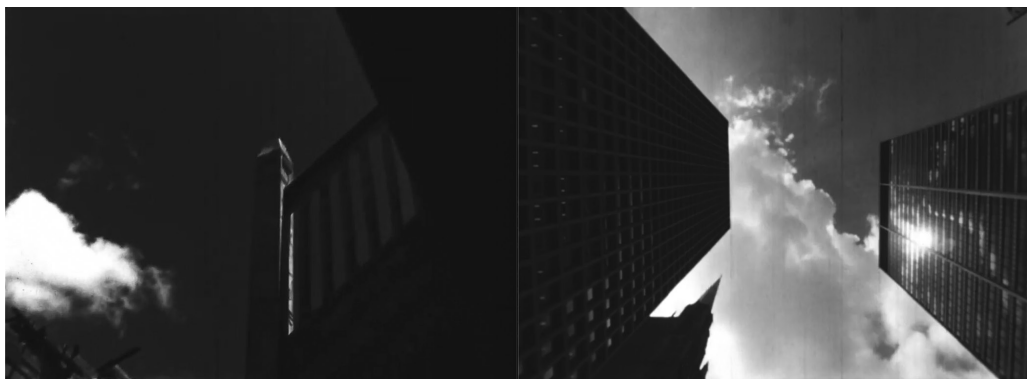


Figure 6.1. Similar low-angle framing of a demolished mansion open to the sky and of Austin skyscrapers, suggesting the ephemerality of both structures in *Down Friday Street* (Tobe Hooper, Motion Picture Productions of Texas, 1966).

on the in-between is key to Hooper's architectural uncanny, which highlights the seemingly negative spaces within visible space. The associational editing of *Down Friday Street* forces spectators to look to the gaps between images for meaning, its style and politics resting on the collision of images of capitalist excess with images of the natural world and structural demolition (fig. 6.1).

But it also suggests something beyond vision, with the symbolic presence of the blackened, empty window frames that feature prominently in its opening section. *Toolbox Murders* and *Djinn* treat this cinematic "curving away" more conventionally in images that disrupt vision, such as the fluttering, blurred, plastic-sheeted spaces in *Toolbox* or the constant sandstorms that obscure the views of the Al Hamra and the desert landscape around it in *Djinn*, rendering the structure a kind of monstrous floating anomaly. An obscured or blurred vision and an emphasis on surfaces in these films suggest a sense of looking at, not through, but also encourages audiences to seek something beyond sight, or between images, for meaning.

In such strategies, Hooper insists on the haptic. Touch and textures are key elements, as is a focus on the media membrane (Marks 2000, 22). In her book *The Skin of the Film*, Laura U. Marks asks, "How can the audiovisual media of film and video represent non-audiovisual experience? There are no technologies that reproduce the experience of touch, smell, taste, and movement" (2000, 211). Marks uses this question as a gambit. Her answer highlights not only the surface of the film, but also the sensations of spectatorial experience, such as the scents associated with screening venues (popcorn, perfume, foods); she likewise points out that artists made use of the reception space—Marcel Pagnol had scents diffused in theatres for screenings of his film *Angèle* (1934), and John Waters developed the Odorama "gimmick" on scratch-and-sniff cards for *Polyester* (1981) (212). In her description of the phenomenon of synesthesia,

Marks explains that it “is the perception of one sensation by another modality, such as the ability to distinguish colors by feel” (213).

Such tactility is key to *Down Friday Street*'s visual style of rapid cutting and dissolves, extreme close-ups, and shifting rack focus; its voice-over, too, acts as an “interplay” (Kozloff 1988, 53) with the images, eschewing narrative causality to create a kaleidoscopic, phantasmagoric, and palimpsestic effect. In *Toolbox Murders*, the Lusman Arms features occult symbols drawn on bronze plaques fastened to sidewalks, floors, and walls. Nell draws the symbols on her arms and uses her own body as a map when trying to locate the townhouse hidden within the larger structure. In doing so, she aligns herself with the building, effectively extending its curse to her flesh. And in *Djinn*, Khalid experiences spatial and temporal shifts as it becomes clear that the Al Hamra was built on the ruins of his childhood home and that he is a djinn himself. The spectral Al Hamra, with its dissonant collision of chalky, coal-dark exterior and smooth, polished interior, is another Hooper edifice that responds to and provokes characters. Hooper's use of these strategies to unsettle the relationships between his characters, spaces, and structures generates dreadful instability—even unreadability—bending the physical world toward the spatiotemporal illogic of nightmare.

DOWN FRIDAY STREET AND THE AVANT-GARDE UNSETTLING OF SPACE

In his early short film *Down Friday Street*, Hooper demonstrates an avant-garde interest in creating “new” surfaces by using zooms, overlapping imagery, and a frenetic editing style that draws attention to the medium as a membrane. An experimental documentary and a kind of uncanny city symphony, *Down Friday Street* presents a barrage of images of urban sites featuring the textures and patterns of the Austin, Texas, cityscape. In the opening part of the film, streetlights, flashing signage, and headlights that ignite the nighttime urban environment are juxtaposed with empty spaces—blackened, glassless window frames, vacant shopping center corridors. The effect of the association is to collapse the two spaces, uncannily undercutting the manic vibrancy of the city with a sense of dread emptiness. This opening sequence sets up a kind of stylistic key to the rest of the film and, arguably, to Hooper's aesthetics of dread: his camera selects, penetrates, moves—even creeps—through spaces.

Hooper often includes in his films shots in which the glare of the sun figures prominently, calling attention to the mechanism and surfaces of the medium itself. Similar shots figure in *Texas Chain Saw*, *Poltergeist*, and *Djinn*. In *Down Friday Street*, he captures rays of sunlight piercing a canopy of trees,

and other shots feature rustling leaves against a backlit sky, reducing the screen to a kind of monochrome shadow play. Several shots of huge, solid-looking houses later appear through the leaves, and Hooper juxtaposes these structures with natural minutiae in a way that would remind viewers of later films such as *Texas Chain Saw* and *Salem's Lot*. A cut-in, for example, details the dripping of a leaky gutter spout onto a slick stone surface, and this segues into a shot of a spiderweb on which a sinister-looking black spider devours an arthropod wriggling and trapped there. Over the image of other houses and broader street scenes, a voice-over enters, echoing with radio test-warnings and sample siren sounds meant to announce numerous forms of impending attack. Later the film turns to images of detritus and structural decay, overlaid by a music-box tune. Hooper's demonstrative camera creeps and probes through seemingly empty, abandoned mansions, images of them juxtaposed jarringly with giant machines clear-cutting forests, the burning branches of felled trees, and crystal chandeliers shivering and tinkling to background sounds of machinery demolishing homes. The film evokes an acute sense of dread, of the impending collapse of not just these structures, but also the economic and cultural forces that created them.

The filmmaker's aesthetics here meet his politics. Through his associational shooting and editing of such images, and his aggressive, even invasive camera-work, Hooper implies that these structures are ephemeral and can be breached, pierced, and transformed by nature as well as by the filmmaking process. When he features a series of interior shots empty of people, he creates dread not simply through stilled representations of absence but also via the suggestion of a presence. We "feel" him (he is credited as the camera operator) behind the camera as he tracks, pans, and zooms—pushing physically through spaces as if to force them to reveal something. The film builds to a riot of zooms, rack focus, and camera movement, with Hooper at certain points running with the camera to explore and exploit sites of destroyed houses, those images juxtaposed with shots of skyscrapers and the impossibly dense signage of suburban sprawl. The surface of things, Hooper seems to suggest, is always illusory, penetrable, and profoundly revelatory. It is as if he wants to break through the solid planes of reality to divulge or create a new surface of meaning. Here, the surfaces suggest a focus on degeneration, which figures prominently in his later work.

Hooper's filmic treatment of space ties *Down Friday Street*—and *Toolbox Murders* and *Djinn*—to American avant-garde filmmaking of the 1940s, particularly the kind of uncanny dreamscapes created by the filmmaker Maya Deren. Deren and Hooper both sought to unify disparate spaces in order to expose reality as a kind of revelatory surface. In her film *At Land* (1944), for example,

Deren collapses spaces to create spatiotemporal ellipses. In the film, a woman (Deren) wakes up on a beach, waves receding from the shore in reverse motion. Deren crawls on the sand, reaching out to a pile of driftwood to raise herself, but in the following shot, her hand finds the edge of a table. Deren's upper body occupies this new space, a room with a long dinner table, people on both sides turning in her direction. Deren looks down. The next shot depicts the lower half of her body still on the beach. This example of spatiotemporal discontinuity, a technique used often by Deren, is similar to ways Hooper charges spaces with uncanny dread in *Down Friday Street*. Hooper's film reflects Deren's strategy in the way the paratactic editing connects spaces that are distinct and even contradictory, such as its collision of images of luxury interiors with demolition, or its further uncanny juxtapositions of an almost phantasmagorical cityscape with the play of shadow and light in silhouetted leaves against the sky.

Though more conventional in style, *Toolbox Murders* and *Djinn* conjure a similar discontinuity effect in the way spatial anomalies suggest environments in process. Following the logic of dreams, different realities fold together, and seemingly solid walls, floors, and ceilings prove to be mutable. For example, the Lusman Arms is a building that encompasses a second structure—a townhouse completely hidden, as if swallowed up by the larger building. Similar to Deren's highlighting of above (dinner party) and below (beach), Nell in *Toolbox Murders* opens a trapdoor that divides above and below, the Lusman Arms from the townhouse, linking the two separate spaces and realities. After Nell falls into the townhouse, the architecture she experiences seems tighter, foreboding. The walls are misshapen. The stairwell closes around her. In this broken space of decay, Nell discovers ways that human "architecture" can be cut up and reassembled. The serial killer Coffin Baby behaves unexpectedly in this, *his* space. Rather than climb the stairs to pursue Nell, he pulls himself up the triangular space—an in-between space—created by the railings that frame the stairs. Like the ubiquitous wraith that gives *Djinn* its title, the malevolent presence here operates almost in conjunction with the architecture, unsettling both structures in ways that echo *Down Friday Street's* concerns with the question whether humans are in symbiosis with or opposition to the spaces they have created.

TOOLBOX MURDERS AND THE UNSETTLED SPACE OF NOT-HOLLYWOOD

Toolbox Murders suggests a counternarrative to the stereotypical sunny skies and opportunity of Tinseltown, a kind of not-Hollywood. The film opens with one of many extreme low-angle shots of the Lusman Arms on a grim, rainy night. The following shot shows, through plastic sheeting surrounding a news

kiosk across the street, a stretcher being loaded into an ambulance. The aptly named Daisy Rain opens the plastic sheeting to enter the kiosk to buy cigarettes. After her first credit card is refused, Daisy rifles through her purse to get her wallet, removing a stun gun, which she demonstrates for the cashier. Throughout the scene, the plastic sheeting acts as a membranous backdrop distorting the objects behind it. An extreme low-angle pan follows Daisy as she exits the kiosk and walks toward the Lusman Arms. This introduction establishes Los Angeles as a rainy, dangerous place where money is tight, violence is imminent, and space is insecure. When Daisy enters the Lusman's juddering elevator, the sight of an open toolbox on the floor makes her uneasy. Soon Daisy's blood will become another membranous backdrop, spattered on a window of her apartment, blurring the skyline of Los Angeles beyond. Hooper focuses on the blood dripping down the window and then racks focus to create an abstract kaleidoscope of color using the streetlights and headlights outside (a favorite motif of his). The inside-outside dynamic collapses private and public space, and organic and inorganic matter, effectively destabilizing the film's physical environment, rendering it porous and unsafe.

The film's unsettled spatial regime renders blood and body parts as architectural add-ons in the aptly named Lusman Arms. The titular toolbox, first noticed by Daisy and later by Nell, contains instruments used to create, maintain, repair—and murder. Its tools have helped construct a hybrid, anthropomorphic building made in part of blood, sinew, and bone. Later in the film, Nell hears her neighbor Saffron playing and singing a song titled “Surrealistic Summer”: “As I sit here, slowly waiting, / I feel just like a Dalí painting,” the song's lyrics alluding to Salvador Dalí's interest in atemporality.³ Soon after, Saffron is attacked in her apartment and then, in an echo of the cemetery corpse-sculpture in *Texas Chain Saw's* opening, is artfully displayed by being nailed to the ceiling over a door in a kind of crucifixion, her lips sewn together while she is still alive. Like Daisy's before her, Saffron's body becomes a horrific embellishment of the structure, effectively collapsing space and body in ways that later parallel Nell mapping the building's occult symbols onto her arm.

The reference to Dalí is the most obvious of a series of textual allusions in *Toolbox* that deepen the film's interest in the fragmentation and dissemination of bodies and psyches across disturbed space (and time). Early on, Nell asks her boyfriend which of Dante's circles of hell the building might be designed to re-create, suggesting a metaphysical reading of the occulted space that Coffin Baby inhabits. As Nell searches the building, yellow wallpaper, shredded and torn, recalls Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story, in which a mentally unstable woman oppressed by patriarchal forces imagines herself melding with the wallpaper so that she might wrest herself back out of it, to

regain control. Additionally, some of the wallpaper patterns in *Toolbox* resemble paintings by the Belgian surrealist Paul Delvaux, particularly *Le Miroir* (1936), in which a woman stares at a nude painting in a decayed, neglected room. In all of these intertexts, a seemingly outward quest turns inward, much like Nell's own sleuthing, which establishes her as the film's primary agent. A later mention by the Lusman Arms' building manager, Byron, that he lives in the apartment once occupied by Elizabeth Short—the famous “Black Dahlia” murder victim, whose body was left mutilated and dismembered, a horrific smile carved into her face—suggests the terrible history tying Nell's quest to a brutal reality.

Nell initially takes up the quest to find a missing tenant named Julia Cunningham, who was supposed to go jogging with Nell but never showed up. In her investigations, Nell discovers additional hidden aspects of the Lusman Arms. Each floor is “missing” an apartment: 104, 204, 304, 404, and 504 are absent. Nell pays a visit to the Los Angeles Preservation Society, where she learns about the Talman Lunar Cult, whose “main guy was some aerospace engineer who tried to fuse science and magic,” according to the attendant, Johnny. Nell uses the symbols found throughout the Lusman Arms (and apparently connected to the cult) to chart her course. From a balcony in a disused section of the building, she sees the classic Los Angeles skyline, finally made visible. Until this point, it seemed as if LA was just not “out there,” beyond the Lusman Arms. Across the stretch of slate roof, on another balcony, an empty rocking chair moves as if someone had just risen from it. Nell investigates. Hooper features her in a long shot, standing on the small balcony behind the rocking chair with LA in the background. The effect is that Nell is in two distinct spaces at once. The skyline, sleek and modern, is held in contrast with the wooden rocking chair on the small rooftop balcony.

Hooper charges such spaces with the sense that they will tip over into new, implied places. When, moments later, Nell finally enters the hidden townhouse through a symbol-engraved trapdoor in the balcony floor, she switches on a light that illuminates an illustration—an imitation view—placed behind a window. The implied space of this image is an artist's fantastical rendering of what Nell just saw, the downtown LA skyline. But it is a sham, a false double of the space outside, amplified to reflect the dreamier side of Hollywood, with its art deco theatres and beaming searchlights. Everything in this monstrous hidden space represents an alternative past. “All this death,” says Nell, “it taps into something that keeps him [the Lusman killer] alive.” Here, as in *Poltergeist* and *Djinn*, Hooper uses unsettled space to evoke an imprisoning oneiric existence—one that Nell, unlike many of the Lusman's residents, escapes intact.

DJINN AND PERMEABLE SPACE

While *Toolbox* strands its characters in a nightmare version of Hollywood and home, in *Djinn* this liminality is an extension of the in-between cultural situation of its protagonist-couple, Khalid and Salama, who have returned to the United Arab Emirates after living in New York City. Once the couple arrives in the UAE, the film's main action quickly shifts from the realities of the airport and urban locations to a more unstable space of dark fantasy. The majority of *Djinn* doesn't take place in any actual place but, like *Toolbox*, unfolds in a fog-ridden nightmare space, its central, seemingly tomb-like building solid and permanent on the surface yet imminently permeable in its interiors.

Djinn, in parallel with the spectral form of its titular demon, foregrounds shifting, uncanny spaces in the Al Hamra residential building and in the spaces traversed to reach it. A highway tunnel becomes a conduit to a space actively different from the reddish desert landscape and its modern high-rise buildings. When their car emerges from the tunnel, Khalid and Salama are surrounded by thick fog, a weather feature that wouldn't naturally occur in the film's arid location. When Khalid steps out of the car to investigate, the fog is all-encompassing. As Khalid steps away from the vehicle, trying to see something, Hooper features a series of swooping, disorienting shots of him; the camera approaches him from the left and then the right, from above and then below. Khalid is finally able to make out a high-rise building designed in the brutalist architectural style—monolithic and virtually windowless. The building is grey black. No lights are on. It is a taller, sleeker version of another structure we see in a flashback of a small fishing village (figs. 6.2 and 6.3). Indeed, as in the kind of erasure of the past that appears in Hooper's *Poltergeist*, the new structure was built on the same site as the old fishing village and shares its name. Both structures, the older one in clay and the new one in what appears to be blackened stone or steel, feature flourishes on the roof that look like blunted horns. The building is the only visible structure in an otherwise desolate landscape, and it seems to have been conjured out of the chaos and fog. Once the characters enter, the building proves to be largely uninhabited. Unlike the spare exterior, the interior is opulent, and the appointments suggest a luxury hotel more than a residential high-rise. As in *Toolbox*'s Lusman Arms, with its hidden townhouse, Hooper implies that there are infinite possible hidden spaces within such solid structures. All that is solid becomes mutable in these architectural anomalies.⁴

The swooping shots described above are echoed later in the film when Salama is in their apartment, leaving a message for her sister. The camera lunges toward her from different sides, encouraging the sense that things are unmoored and suggesting the same presence that Hooper's aggressive, creeping



Figures 6.2 and 6.3. The Al Hamra apartment complex (*above*) and corresponding fishing village structure (*below*) in *Djinn* (Tobe Hooper, Image Nation, 2013).

camera evoked in the similarly opulent spaces of the mansions in *Down Friday Street*. Salama later hears a baby crying through a vent, and like *Toolbox*'s Nell, she feels compelled to investigate. Vents are conduits in *Djinn*, linking unseen spaces to those inhabited by characters. Salama also witnesses hands pushing up through the floor and down from the ceiling. Walls and floors, which traditionally mark the barriers of domestic safeholds, here are porous, permeable. In the world of *Djinn*'s haunted space, solid surfaces can be breached. There is always the potential for permeability.

In one of *Djinn*'s final scenes, Khalid occupies one spatial dimension (the lobby entrance of the Al Hamra building) while two police officers occupy another as they approach the building, whose front doors are covered in plastic sheeting reminiscent of those shifting, blurring membranes in *Toolbox Murders*. Khalid sees the officers, but they do not see him. These different spaces or dimensions are briefly unified by a shot of Khalid yelling to the officers from

behind the plastic sheeting. At the end of the film, Khalid parts plastic sheets like a curtain to find Salama gripping the railing of the penthouse balcony and dangling precariously over its edge. *Toolbox Murders*' plastic sheeting demarcates whole sections of the Lusman Arms that are out of bounds, under construction (in process and therefore mutable). In *Djinn*, too, the quasi-anomalous prevalence of such boundary markers is an indication of Hooper's insistence on including such membranes as a form of spatial destabilization and transition.

Djinn was Hooper's final film, and as such it holds an important though precarious place in the director's oeuvre. Produced by an Emirati company (Imagenation Abu Dhabi, now Image Nation), the film premiered at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival on October 25, 2013, but did not fare well critically and did not receive a theatrical release. *Variety*, for example, called it "a cheesy, ham-fisted ghost story," placing the blame on nearly everyone involved, including a poor script and lackluster cinematography, editing, and digital effects (Weissberg 2013). Yet the film, the first horror film produced by the UAE's fledgling film industry, caused a stir nonetheless; there were reports of creative struggles relating to "rewrites and restructuring," and rumors of drastic reediting and reshooting (by another director) to censor material unfavorable to representations of the UAE or the Emirati people (Hoad 2012). A source linked to the *Guardian* notes, "Someone close to Abu Dhabi's royal family has seen the movie and does not appreciate its portrayal of the UAE, and considers the movie to be politically subversive" (Hoad 2012). The political implications of the film's multigenerational haunting—and particularly its suggestion that an important local history and place were paved over—fits squarely with Hooper's subversion of his own country's relentless expansion, in films such as *Down Friday Street*, *Texas Chain Saw*, *Poltergeist*, and *Mortuary*. The additional irony that this film's particular political subversiveness might have stalled a developing national film industry is clear and powerful.⁵ Hooper's interest in disrupted, destabilized, and mutable space recurs here in the powerfully political ways apparent early in his career in *Down Friday Street* and *Eggshells*. If *Djinn* is "one for the Hooper complet[i]st" only (Noonan 2013), its importance comes, like that of *Down Friday Street* and *Toolbox Murders*, in a refusal to "settle" in its revelatory politics of space.

NOTES

1. A similar effect occurs in *The Apartment Complex*, a darkly comical revisiting of Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* (1976) that aired on Showtime in 1999. The apartment complex of the title, "The Wonder View," is a geometrically anomalous space, paralleled in the film by a maze housing rats under clinical observation in a science laboratory.

2. Another possible allusion to Polanski's *The Tenant*.

3. The addition of awkward lyrics such as “The government seems so surreal / when sun and heat is all I feel” harks back to the opening political protest in Hooper’s *Eggshells*. Rick Worland made similar observations in his analysis of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (2007, 219–220).

4. See the introduction for a discussion of a similar sense of spatial and structural dread in Hooper’s “The Maze,” a segment of an episode of the TV series *Night Visions* (2001–2002, episode 11).

5. Hooper’s presence here was seen as something of a coup, signaling the bankability of the UAE film industry, but there was also some suggestion that in the wake of the Arab Spring, “such a flagship film project going out under an American film director’s name may have been a source of embarrassment and what exacerbated the creative struggles” (Hoad 2012).

P A R T I I

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NIGHTMARE IMAGES

Tobe Hooper on Horror and Aging

ADAM LOWENSTEIN

TOBE HOOPER KNOWS WHAT SCARES us. In fact, the language most often used to describe Hooper's films, whether by critics or by the director himself, is the language of the nightmare (Wood 2018, 97; Lowenstein 2016; Hooper 2003). So it is striking that in a career brimming with nightmare images of many kinds, a particularly haunting and persistent subset of images involves themes of aging: life's perceived decay, dissolution, and decrepitude. In other words, Hooper knows that we are especially afraid of old age, to the point that we struggle mightily to render it invisible. But how and why does Hooper work so hard to achieve just the opposite: conjuring into visibility old age as a preoccupation of our nightmares?

In a recent overview of the humanistic field of age studies, the psychology and gender studies scholar Lynne Segal notes our aversion to aging: "In western societies especially, we find ourselves early on directed to become, and above all to remain, autonomous, independent, future-oriented individuals. Such teaching, with its disavowal of so much about our human vulnerabilities, passivity, interdependence, and mortality, can only shore up trouble for the future. It ensures that all too soon, our registering of aging is likely to prove a perplexing, even frightening, affair" (Segal 2014, 31–32). What Segal observes about our difficulty in registering aging can extend to forms of social blindness directed toward older people. In her introduction to a seminal anthology in age studies, Kathleen Woodward (drawing on the research of the anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff) describes Western society's sometimes quite literal inability to see older people, and older women in particular, as "death by invisibility" (Woodward 1999, ix).

Hooper's films suggest that he would not be surprised by these findings from age studies. He knows that old age scares us, but he also knows that we have built powerful defenses to deny it and neutralize it, to counteract its visibility. So

he shows us old age in a funhouse mirror: the image distorted just enough for us to look on rather than to look away, enabling us to catch a glimpse of who we really are, a sight that burrows straight into what Hooper calls our “nightmare zone,” where horrific images arranged by the director for “harmonic” impact force into visibility “the stuff that we don’t open the door on” (Hooper 2003). This nightmare zone functions as a sort of primal nerve center where visceral and psychological horrors cross paths as mutually informing experiences of sensation and understanding. We know the horror because we feel it, and we feel the horror because we know it. In Hooper’s films, what we come to feel and know, and therefore see, are precisely those nightmare images of aging that we usually wish to relegate to invisibility.

What follows is not a comprehensive survey of nightmare images of aging in Hooper’s films, but meditations on a few key examples illustrating how and why Hooper cracks the “death by invisibility” lens through which we prefer to view the aged. The examples proceed thematically rather than chronologically to provide a sense of how Hooper constructed these images across his oeuvre. *The Funhouse* (1981), *Salem’s Lot* (1979), and *Lifeforce* (1985) constitute the essay’s main focus, and a concluding section considers Hooper’s two *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974, 1986) films.

THE FUNHOUSE

Since I have already evoked the metaphor of the funhouse mirror, I will begin with *The Funhouse*. In this film, the teenage Amy and three friends visit a traveling carnival and decide to sneak into the funhouse after hours so that they can spend the night there illicitly. They stumble upon a host of secrets hidden by the carnival folk, including the true identity of the funhouse barker’s mysterious son: an abused, murderous, deformed man who works at the carnival and shields his face from the world by wearing a Frankenstein’s Monster mask. Once the barker and his son learn of the intruders and their knowledge of them, they set about killing them, one by one. Amy and her friends fight for their lives, but only Amy survives; both the barker and his son perish as well. Amy leaves the funhouse alone the following morning.

Curiously, Hooper does not show us a funhouse mirror, despite setting most of his film at a carnival and offering us a fairly encyclopedic tour of its rides and amusements. Perhaps this absence can cue us to how the film itself can be usefully construed as a funhouse mirror. Hooper shows us to ourselves in a manner that combines monstrous distortion and honest recognition. Just as Amy and her friends discover a nightmare reflection of their own lives and desires in the twilight world of the funhouse (sex, parents, siblings, family),



Figure 7.1. The Monster (Wayne Doba) in *The Funhouse* (Tobe Hooper, Universal, 1981).

so too does the film's central nightmare image, the barker's son (listed in the credits as "The Monster" and played by Wayne Doba), reflect back an image of aging that strikes us as both shocking and familiar.

The Monster's elderly appearance is a familiar image of aging: unkempt, thinning white hair and wrinkled, clawlike hands (fig. 7.1). But the Monster is also a shocking image of aging with regard to his simultaneous youthfulness: he is preverbal, sexually inexperienced, bullied by his father, and prone to fly into tantrum-like rages directed at himself and others. He is also imposingly strong, demonstrating how his twisted, arthritic-looking hands are actually lethal tools for slashing and strangulation. Hooper drives home the Monster's doubleness, his deeply disturbing amalgam of young and old, by giving him an unforgettable horrifying "multiplied" face. The Monster's face features a deep, almost ax-wound-like indentation running from his forehead down through his nostrils, giving him the appearance of splitting in two; and in fact, he dies when the mechanical gears beneath the funhouse cut him in half. It may be that the Monster's doubleness functions as an internalized funhouse mirror, reflecting both himself and his distorted reflection, young and old, at the same time.

An additional dimension of the Monster's doubleness is his parallels to Amy's young brother, Joey. Like the Monster, Joey owns a Frankenstein's Monster mask and "stalks" Amy in the style of *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) early in the film. Joey's "stalking" of his sister as she showers is ultimately revealed as playful mischief, even if Amy's enraged reaction to his "game" and Joey's internalization of her reaction suggests there is more at stake here for both of them than mere sibling teasing. Indeed, Joey's fear of entering the funhouse later in the film (where he could potentially help his sister) is conditioned in part by his fear of once again violating Amy's sexual privacy (as he did in the shower). The Monster's pursuit of Amy is terrifyingly

murderous, but like Joey, the Monster is capable of adolescent confusion about where to draw the line between childlike and adult behavior. Figuratively, then, the Monster is as threatening as an older psychotic killer and as innocent as a younger brother.

The Monster is emblematic of Hooper's approach to aging through horror: mix signs of youthfulness (which we can usually bear to see) with those of old age (which we usually do not want to see or cannot see) in order to defamiliarize both, allowing unorthodox images of aging to penetrate our defenses. Like Frankenstein's Monster, whose visage becomes his disguise, and the closely related Leatherface in the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* films, the Monster possesses disconcertingly human qualities alongside his deadly monstrosity: a clumsy craving for female romantic contact, vulnerability to his father's abuse, an inability to contain his frustration with himself. This human-monster mixture informs *The Funhouse's* debt to classic horror traditions, but it is even more striking how Hooper employs human-monster as one more layer of doubleness that enhances the young-old juxtaposition. Indeed, Hooper's films help highlight how aging figures in classic horror's cinematic imagination, whether in the shape of Frankenstein's Monster as possessing a childlike mind within an old, lumbering body assembled from corpse parts; Dracula as an ancient being with the voracious appetite of a newborn; the Mummy as an age-old monster frozen in time, yearning for the reincarnation of his young love from long ago; or the Wolf Man as the victim of an ancient curse that not only robs him of his memory during transformations, in a sort of lunar-induced dementia, but also turns back the evolutionary clock.

In fact, we might say that Hooper makes modern horror images out of classic horror themes precisely through his nightmarish visualization of aging. The Monster of *The Funhouse* revises Frankenstein's Monster by discarding the reassuringly familiar mask to reveal the shocking horror beneath: a face splitting in half through the colliding signs of youth and old age. In the next section, I turn from Hooper's take on Frankenstein's Monster in *The Funhouse* to his interpretations of the vampire in *Salem's Lot* and *Lifeforce* to enhance our understanding of how Hooper uses aging to make modern horror from classic horror.

SALEM'S LOT AND LIFEFORCE

Salem's Lot, Hooper's made-for-television adaptation of a 1975 Stephen King novel about vampires terrorizing a small town in Maine, is instructive in its capacity to produce nightmare images of aging even within the restricted visual vocabulary of network television. Hooper withholds the image of his main vampire, Kurt Barlow, until late in the film. When Barlow appears, he resembles



Figure 7.2. The vampire, Kurt Barlow (Reggie Nalder), in *Salem's Lot* (Tobe Hooper, CBS, 1979).

Max Schreck in *Nosferatu* (F. W. Murnau, 1922) much more than Bela Lugosi in *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931) (fig. 7.2). Barlow is an aged, ratlike vampire, not the ageless, seductive Dracula. Barlow, like a very old man or an animal, does not speak; he allows his human assistant, Richard Straker, to speak for him. The fact that Straker is played by an aging James Mason, once a dashing leading man but now locked in battle with the much younger David Soul (as the charismatic writer Ben Mears, who is out to expose the vampire epidemic), adds weight to the film's investment in aging imagery. In a sequence near the film's conclusion, Straker demonstrates a disturbingly youthful, even superhuman strength as he protects his and Barlow's home from intruding investigators. He even impales a man on a set of decorative trophy antlers with his bare hands (see chap. 4, fig. 4.3). By the time Straker succumbs to a hail of bullets from Mears, we can no longer equate old age with weakness, nor aging star with fading star—Mason's presence handily overpowers Soul's in their shared scenes.

But neither Barlow nor Straker embody the most intense nightmare image of aging in *Salem's Lot*. Instead, it is the young boy Ralphie Glick. As a victim of vampirism early in the film, Ralphie visits his brother Danny during the night, tapping insistently on his window to be let in. Hooper's vision of Ralphie floating in an otherworldly mist outside the window and displaying equally the characteristics of a young, innocent boy (small, vulnerable body dressed in pajamas) and an old, evil vampire (menacing fangs, glowing eyes) reaches its



Figure 7.3. Ralphie (Ronnie Scribner) entering his brother Danny's room, floating and smiling obscenely, in *Salem's Lot* (Tobe Hooper, CBS, 1979).

apex in Ralphie's obscene smile (fig. 7.3). His smile is a truly chilling expression of young playfulness and old murderousness, an image that lays waste to conventional young-old distinctions. We know whom Ellen is letting in when she opens her window to the vampire in *Nosferatu*. But whom exactly is Danny letting in? Is it his beloved brother? A monstrous vampire? Or some terrifying combination of the two that defies our categorizations of young and old?

Horror studies scholarship has often drawn attention to how category violations such as alive-dead and subject-object tend to structure definitions of monstrosity presented in the genre's texts (Tudor 1989; Carroll 1990; Creed 1993). But young-old differs from these sorts of category violations by finally not really being a violation at all. As the cultural studies scholar Jodi Brooks observes in her analysis of aging female film characters such as Baby Jane Hudson in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962): "What these characters and their performances offer is a form of crisis in which time is loaded to the breaking point . . . Their refusal to leave the stage and the ways in which they negotiate their status as image take the form of *stretching time*, of re-pacing the temporality of spectacle, display, and performance" (1999, 234). In other words, the act of stretching time in this way undoes our ability to neatly parse time into young and old categories. Baby Jane Hudson is both child star and aging star at once, her performance (especially as realized by Bette Davis) slyly refusing to respect young-old boundaries by stretching our

perception of time's passing. Aren't we all simultaneously young and old in our relative awareness or unawareness of ourselves in relation to our age? When exactly do we become "old"? Most of us fear becoming old, perhaps even more than we fear death, because old age seems to represent the end of life in full and the beginning of life in diminishment. But this whole notion of youth as more and old age as less is just one, very particular approach to perceiving time, an approach with limitations that become clear when time is stretched beyond the conventional markers of old and young. Hooper's image of Ralphie achieves this stretching of time, just as the performance of Baby Jane Hudson does.

Ralphie is a young boy merged with a supernatural vampire, while Baby Jane Hudson is an older woman without any explicit connection to the supernatural. Given the close relation between age studies and feminist theory, this difference is worth dwelling on for a moment. A number of age studies scholars have pointed out how women and men in Western societies experience aging quite differently. As Kathleen Woodward puts it, women around fifty experience aging in a way "that does not have the same counterpart in men" with regard to "psychological, social, and economic consequences" (1999, xiii). Woodward continues, "By experiencing aging, I am referring primarily to the internalization of our culture's denial of and distaste for aging, which is understood in terms of decline, not in terms of growth and change" (1999, xiii). E. Ann Kaplan (1999) presses harder on such a formulation, arguing that for women, aging can be a traumatic experience. So if women bear the social brunt of our fear of aging, why does Hooper tend to prefer males for his nightmare images of aging?

One way to begin answering this question is by noting that Hooper is not above using misogynistic codings of aging in his work. Consider, for example, how the aging fortune-teller Madame Zena in *The Funhouse* must absorb a horrific punishment—murder—for the Monster's failed sexual encounter with her. It is hard to miss the implication that an older woman engaging in sex is somehow inherently monstrous (a belief compounded with moral condemnation of prostitution), while the younger Amy's "natural" experience of sex in the funhouse with her boyfriend is survivable. But Hooper, in his dedicated quest to breach our nightmare zone, to get to the root of what really scares us, seems to know that women often provide a convenient deflection for what truly scares his male viewers: male aging, with its attendant perceived loss of virility and perhaps even of masculinity itself. Hooper shows us the aging we would rather not see, male aging in particular, which is even more unthinkable than female aging. At his most ambitious and adventurous, Hooper suggests that even female aging can be imagined by men only as a defense against their own fears of aging. In *Lifeforce*, Hooper enacts this thesis in a remarkably flamboyant way.



Figure 7.4. Vampirism as grotesque aging in *Lifeforce* (Tobe Hooper, Cannon Films, 1985).

Lifeforce, like *Salem's Lot*, is a vampire film. But whereas *Salem's Lot* prefers the microcosm of its isolated small-town setting, *Lifeforce* embraces the macrocosm of outer space and the apocalyptic destruction of one of the world's largest cities (London). In this adaptation of Colin Wilson's novel *The Space Vampires* (1976), three humanoid alien life forms are discovered in space, brought back to Earth for investigation, and then escape, triggering a mass vampirism outbreak that eventually reduces London to a fiery ruin. The nightmare images of aging in *Lifeforce* revolve around what the film's crew nicknamed "the walking shriveled," those victims of the space vampires whose living energy has been sucked dry but who become reanimated as frenzied husks of their former selves with a need to feed on others (*Lifeforce* 1998). The walking shriveled are, as their nickname implies, grotesquely aged (fig. 7.4). With their skeletal features barely covered by taut, grayish skin, they project old age as total desiccation, the evaporation of "lifeforce," utterly vampirized. But what makes these images of aging as decay most nightmarish is that they are desperately alive with embodied energy. They writhe, scream, grasp, and shake, eventually exploding into ash if they cannot feed. In short, the walking shriveled join the Monster of *The Funhouse* and Ralphie of *Salem's Lot* as nightmarish visions of aging because of their wild mixing of signs associated with young and old age.

What sets the walking shriveled of *Lifeforce* apart is how they are created through contact with their visual opposite: not only youth, but sexualized and feminine youth in particular. The key space vampire, referred to in the film's credits as "Space Girl," takes the shape of a stunningly beautiful woman who appears entirely nude during most of the film. Even though she has two similarly striking male space-vampire counterparts, Hooper focuses on her. Echoing the same visual logic, the two examples of the walking shriveled that Hooper

emphasizes are both male, although a female victim of Space Girl undergoes a memorably failed scientific inspection. *Lifeforce*'s sexual atmosphere is quite polymorphous overall, with Space Girl's possession of a male doctor's mind leading to an on-screen suggestion of gay male sex that her "lesbian" encounter with her female victim evokes, too, but leaves offscreen. Still, Hooper assigns the majority of the film's visual weight to a female space vampire and male versions of the walking shriveled. By the time Space Girl's true identity is revealed to be a giant bat-like alien, we have learned that her image as a beautiful woman was sourced from the lead male astronaut Carlsen's imagination—perfect femininity as projected by male fantasy.

So it is the male imagination that is visualized and inspected in *Lifeforce*, with youthful, sexualized femininity serving only as an illusion that distracts from man's ultimate destiny: to become the walking shriveled. Even when Carlsen copulates with Space Girl, he must kill her and himself simultaneously by spearing their conjoined bodies with a long phallic sword. Youth may live by the sexual sword, but only to die by the same sword. With images like these, *Lifeforce* becomes Hooper's most forceful presentation of old age as a male nightmare at heart. The denials and deflections provided by female aging and female youth may generate temporary relief, but behind the disguises, the true fear of male aging can always be detected.

THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE FILMS

The iconography of the mask is nearly as central to Hooper's work as the iconography of aging, and his most famous film stands at the crossroads between the two. In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, we can find the original model for the walking shriveled in Grandpa, the patriarch of the chain-saw clan. He is almost impossibly wizened, so old that at times it is difficult to tell whether he is dead or alive. But like the walking shriveled, when he comes to life, he expresses a disturbingly youthful energy. In Grandpa's case, this youthfulness is positively babyish. In an especially macabre moment, Grandpa sucks the blood from the slashed finger of Sally, sending him into infantile ecstasies of kicking feet and twisting arms. In an instant, the former slaughterhouse legend transforms from an ancient invalid (who later has difficulty even grasping the hammer meant for Sally's head) to a vampiric baby thrilled by nursing. Again, we are shocked by this unexpected collision of youth and old age, with its nightmarish combination of horror, absurdity, and black comedy. Hooper bursts through our conceptions of what aging means by scrambling visions of old age and youth on his way to our nightmare zone, part of a larger orchestration of what Christopher Sharrett calls the film's concern with "the collapse of time" (2004, 315).

This is why Grandpa, who poses no real physical threat, can still occupy the foreground of nightmares triggered by *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.

Grandpa shares the nightmare stage with several other unforgettable figures in the film, of whom the best known is undoubtedly Leatherface. In his masks stitched together from human flesh, Leatherface extends the aging imagery in Hooper's work in significant ways. Unlike the masked Monster of *The Funhouse*, Leatherface is never unmasked. Even when alone at home, he does not remove his mask. He changes his appearance, most notably when dressing up as a maternal figure for dinner, complete with wig and kitchen apron, but Leatherface and his masks are one. In a strange way, his masks make him ageless. He has appropriated someone else's face and made it his own in such a horrifyingly literal manner that his own face melts away. The union of face and mask in Leatherface mocks our conventional notions about aging, with their obsessive focus on the face as the "truthful" index to age's visibility.

Indeed, Vivian Sobchack has argued that cinema and cosmetic surgery are aligned in their shared devotion to maintaining a seamlessly youthful body that does not speak of its aging: "The whole point is that, for the 'magic' to work, the 'seams'—both the lines traced by age and the scars traced by surgery—must not show" (1999, 205). Sobchack is thinking of aging women here, and of the sort of common plastic surgery that might at first seem entirely inapplicable to Leatherface's horrifying approach to "surgery" through human slaughter, but the point is that Leatherface wears a skin mask whose seams show, a mask that speaks of aging. The mask speaks of aging by drawing attention to itself as a face in its own right, not an illusorily youthful beautification of an aging face. Comparative scales of youthful "beauty" and aging "ugliness" are made ridiculous by Leatherface's mask-as-face and face-as-mask. In Leatherface, Hooper crafts an image that overturns our instinct to "read" the face for traces of aging. Through the language of nightmare, Leatherface offers a terrifying but potentially radical critique of how we perceive aging, and of the masks we employ (whether from surgery or self-deception) to keep aging invisible. Leatherface makes the mask visible to us and demands that we see through it, beyond it, without it.

The faceless vision of aging that Leatherface presents may be impossible to process. It appears to rob Sally of her sanity at the conclusion of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, when her once angelically young face becomes nearly unrecognizable through layers of blood, tears, and maniacal laughter. But when Hooper revisits Leatherface in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, he hints that even if the lessons of Leatherface on aging cannot be thought (that may well be the road to madness), perhaps they can be embodied. In one of the film's most unsettling scenes, the intrepid female disc jockey Stretch, stepping into Sally's shoes as the tortured prey of Leatherface and his family, receives a gift of sorts

from Leatherface. He masks her face with the flesh he has ripped from her male coworker, puts a cowboy hat on her head, and then dances with her. It is as if Leatherface, who has clearly fallen for Stretch romantically, wishes to teach her something about the nature of her face as well as his own. "A face is a mask. You can change it and no longer feel beholden to it," Leatherface's strange gesture seems to say. When they dance, he is temporarily concealing her from the rest of his homicidal family, but he is also likely reflecting on his earlier encounter with her, when Stretch "saved face" by simulating sexual arousal rather than screaming with fear at the sight of Leatherface's chain saw. "It's the dance that matters, not the face" might be an additional sentiment Leatherface is trying to communicate to Stretch in an attempt to get her to recognize something she knows instinctively, on some level, already.

Privileging the dance over the face turns out to be a lesson in aging as much as in slaughterhouse survival. Stretch, by the film's conclusion, has not only outlived her assailants but also inhabited Leatherface himself. She commandeers the chain saw from the lap of the clan's grandmother (a juxtaposed vision of decrepit age and buxom fertility that makes Grandpa seem tame) and disposes of Chop-Top. Stretch's final gesture is her version of Leatherface's dance that ended *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, with the chain saw buzzing aloft, now an animating force in its own right, since there is no one left to hunt or vanquish. Stretch's contorted face and frenzied yelling is not distant from Sally's madness, but Stretch's face-mask is decidedly her own. It is her chain saw, her dance, her face-mask. She wears no mask except the one that Leatherface willed to her: the mask-as-face and face-as-mask. Whatever the future may hold for Stretch, she will not fear the supposed emptiness of aging. She has activated the fullness of her name, stretching time beyond the breaking points of youth and old age. She even demolishes cinematic time, since the conclusions of the two *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* films meld into one through her gestural becoming of Leatherface. This is becoming not so much in the Deleuzian sense as in Vivian Sobchack's redefinition of "aging" as "always becoming" (1999, 209). Carol J. Clover deftly analyzes Stretch as an important iteration of what she calls the slasher film's "Final Girl" survivor-heroine (1992, 21–64). But what I believe my turn to aging imagery ultimately suggests is that Stretch is no Final Girl; she is a Final Woman.

Tobe Hooper's career testifies to his expertise in knowing what scares us. The prevalence of aging imagery in his films, expertly modulated to surmount our defensive reflexes toward old age and erupt in our nightmare zone, offers an alternative account of the significance of his work. Studying that oeuvre through the framework of nightmare images of aging, rather than of perfectly wrought films, allows the power of these images to stand in their own right as

one of Hooper's major cinematic achievements. The examples from *The Funhouse*, *Salem's Lot*, *Lifeforce*, and the two *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* films are particularly potent, but not the only possible cases. I hope other scholars will teach us about other images so that we can build a better sense of Hooper's work as a whole, and how much value it has for age studies, horror studies, and the nightmare territory shared between them.

EXPERIMENTAL SORCERY IN TOBE HOOPER'S *EGGSHELLS*

MARIO DEGIGLIO-BELLEMARE

THE HOUSE IS THE MAIN attraction in many of Tobe Hooper's films, and this is also true of his first, *Eggshells* (1969). Hooper creates spaces, both sonically and visually, that seem to vibrate with intensity. From *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) to *Djinn* (2013), Hooper's films are firmly anchored in the spatial ecology of the horror genre, with its terrible, haunted, and carnivalesque houses. *Eggshells* is an experimental feature shot in Austin, Texas (in 16 mm), from a perspective that posits a communal house as something more than just a space; rather, it embodies and generates something akin to what Patricia McCormack (2010) describes as corporeal "cinemasochism," the spectator's synesthetic relationship to the cinema. Following McCormack, the house can be understood not only as an entity or a character, but also as a trip in "unthought" in which meaning collapses (157). I extend my analysis outward in lines of flight that open up three key tropes in Hooper's career: experimentation, the *huis clos* (enclosed space), and trippy borders.

Eggshells can be appreciated in affectively relational terms that link up with spectatorial experiences of what the film does rather than what it represents. Rather than framing the house in the protopschoanalytical terms associated with the American Gothic, with its repressed traumas waiting to be unearthed from the basement of the individual or national unconscious, *Eggshells* posits the house as an experience of immersive intensity. In this case, such intensity is related to the immediate context of the anti-Vietnam War struggle and the counterculture's unraveling at the film's historical moment. *Eggshells* has been almost completely overlooked by critics because it does not fit within the easily drawn categories identified with Hooper as a horror director, and because it is a nonnarrative film. It has been discussed since its restoration in 2009, even when treated positively, as a "rambling vision of hippie life in Austin" (Gordon-Bouzard 2017). To discuss the house in *Eggshells* as an experience of



Figure 8.1. The communal house in *Eggshells* (Tobe Hooper, 1969).

immersive masochism is to highlight something central to Hooper's vision as a horror filmmaker. Immersive masochism is a strategy Hooper returned to in his next film, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, another work that uses elements of experimental cinema within the parameters of narrative cinema. Carol Clover (1992) argued in psychoanalytic terms that the slasher subgenre functions as a spectatorial masochistic, rather than sadistic, experience. *Eggshells* allows for the opportunity to think about masochism as present intensity over past trauma precisely because it resists the causal and character-based conventions of narrative.

EXPERIMENTATION IN AUSTIN, TEXAS

Eggshells portrays a group of students who rent a house and experiment with communal living in Austin. An entity that Hooper calls a "crypto-embryonic hyper-electric presence" seems to move into the basement (Hooper 2017). Hooper is interested in the "trips" taken by freedom seekers in Austin, a city known to be on the left of the political spectrum in conservative Texas. I call them trips in part because of the immensely popular *Easy Rider* (directed by Dennis Hopper), also released in 1969, which revitalized and recontextualized the American road drama. But as is typical of Hooper's cinema, *Eggshells* is a much more housebound than road-bound film. And like all trips, it is about borders: the drug trip, sex trip, artist trip, and the trip outside the bounds of normality. The film itself is a psychedelic trip that immerses spectators in the potentialities of freedom. Costarring Kim Henkel, who founded the production company Vortex with Hooper and collaborated on *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *Eaten Alive* (1976), *Eggshells* focuses on people politically engaged in movements for change in the 1960s. Mahlon Foreman arrives at the house from a small town and

hooks up with Toes (Henkel, credited as Boris Schnurr); they share space with two other couples: Allen and Sharon Danzinger and their infant child, and Amy Lester and David Noll, who get married later in the film.¹ The entity, played by an actor using the pseudonym Ron Barnhart, hooks up with a partner later in the film, Pamela Craig, whom it encounters in a park holding a fistful of balloons.² This entity is perhaps a manifestation of the energy of the antiwar protests, since he first appears outside the house in an early scene in conjunction with the exploding and flaming up of a paper airplane. While in the house, the entity has no engagement with the other members until the final scene, when it meets Toes and Mahlon and seemingly evaporates in a sort of alchemical process. The friends eat, drink, sleep, have sex, and smoke together. They recite poetry and paint sections of the house together. They have parties and soak in the bathtub, where they discuss the political context of their behavior.³ They drive around Austin, and in one scene Toes makes his car explode after he strips naked in a field. In short, they are a collective experimenting with notions of community outside the norms of bourgeois heteronormativity. The entity goes through a purifying process in the basement when he finds a sword and duels with himself (in an edited montage of cuts of the same actor), not as the cathartic release of a past trauma buried in the basement, but as a nonconscious expression of rage embodied in the house.⁴ It is a film about freedom, and it is also a free film.

Eggshells was shot in 1968 over a period of “seven, eight, or nine months” (Hooper 2017). It was “long considered lost” until it “was rediscovered, restored, and re-released . . . at the SXSW Film Festival in 2009” by “*Austin Chronicle* Editor-in Chief Louis Black” (Baumgarten 2014).⁵ John Kenneth Muir’s book on Hooper, *Eaten Alive at a Chainsaw Massacre* (originally published in 2002), devotes only one paragraph to the film. Muir describes it as “a 90-minute fantasy and social commentary concerning a group of hippies sharing a commune house where a strange, ‘crypto-embryonic hyper electric’ and perhaps malevolent, entity, was dwelling in the basement” ([2002] 2015, 11). Muir’s description of “hippies sharing a commune” recalls the Manson Family, whose members lived at the old Spahn Movie Ranch and infamously murdered the actress Sharon Tate (and four others) in her home on August 8, 1969—the same year *Eggshells* was finished and released. In addition to this unsettling parallel, Hooper made his film at the University of Texas in the shadow of its own tragedy: Charles Whitman, a student and former U.S. Marine sharpshooter—decidedly not a hippie—shot almost fifty people from (and inside) the university’s central tower on August 1, 1966, killing fourteen.⁶ The tower figures prominently at the three-minute mark of *Eggshells* as Hooper pans over the words “The truth shall make you free,”⁷ incised into the building, and then cuts to a sun-bleached American flag and pans down the flagpole to reveal protesters carrying a coffin.

This opening is no quaint time capsule of the period, but a show of rage at US imperialism in Vietnam, which, like the Manson Family and Whitman, was producing a culture of death. In the streets, the protesters carry a sign that says, “The Government is Violent—NOT US,” and the lyrics of the song on the soundtrack remind the viewer, “People are dying uptown.” Mahlon is shown at the protest, gazing at storefronts in telephoto close-ups. Hooper finally leaves “uptown,” cutting to a shot that grazes verdant green bushes as he walks with his camera on his shoulder toward the house, turning the corner and walking up the path, revealing the entity coming out the front door. The house is thus not only a retreat from the death-dealing American government, but a space for sustaining the intensity of rage featured in the opening. Hooper cuts to a rack focus on leaves and then cuts on movement—the wind stirring leaves, and a paper airplane suddenly flaming up. Hooper cuts to the inside. A person is going downstairs. People are waking up. Hooper never shows the group arriving. They are already inside the house.

THE US AVANT-GARDE

Eggshells is an avant-garde film by a group of people who were also experimenting with living outside the conformity of bourgeois capitalist heteronormativity (Wood 1979). It is a film made with and in community, and most of the players play themselves. Hooper’s process here was not unlike that of the Italian neo-realists, who were for the most part Marxists and anti-Fascists, taking their cameras out into the streets to tell their own stories, but from the perspective of the working classes and peasants. Directors influenced by neorealism took their cameras into the city streets, challenging Hollywood hegemony after World War II. The French New Wave changed the grammar of cinema in the 1950s and 1960s, calling into question the tenets of classical Hollywood and blurring the borders between documentary and fiction. At the forty-nine-minute mark of *Eggshells*, after cutting from an extreme close-up on the eye of the entity in the basement, Hooper uses dripped paint on celluloid to express the internal experience of a drug trip. In the 1960s, the underground filmmaker Stan Brakhage experimented with the materiality of film, painting and gluing real-world elements directly onto celluloid, such as in the four-minute *Moth-light* (1963), in which moth wings attached directly to film create tactile bursts of color. The same year, Kenneth Anger added a rock soundtrack to his half-hour experimental short *Scorpio Rising*. Hooper uses music much the same way in *Eggshells*, and the film features songs for most of its length by Spencer

Perskin, Shiva's Headband, and Jim Schulman. Like the stunning experimental soundscapes he would create with Wayne Bell for *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, Hooper creates his own music in *Eggshells*' dripped-paint sequence, using broken instruments such as the Japanese koto and a violin.

Eggshells deploys multiple strategies of avant-garde cinema: long takes, jump cuts, immersive zooming, extreme close-ups, pixilation (using a Bolex), kaleidoscopic colors, the manipulation of film stock, optical printing, and, especially, abstract imagery. Marjorie Baumgarten's condescending comment in a 2014 *Austin Chronicle* article that "Hooper had watched more than a film or two by Jean-Luc Godard" undermines the importance of the US underground tradition, which informs his work. For example, filmmakers in the 1960s were nourished by Charlie Parker's 1940s bebop, Jack Kerouac and the rest of the post-World War II Beat movement, and free jazz in the 1960s with Ornette Coleman, who, incidentally, hailed from Fort Worth. Coleman burst onto the scene with his *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* in 1960, its two quartets recorded in the left and right channels. Cacophonous and free, the musicians who worked with Coleman improvised as solo and collective artists and recorded the album in the same way that Hooper shot his film: with some structural preparation and much improvisation. Another important example from the US avant-garde is the towering figure of Maya Deren, whose fourteen-minute surrealist *Meshes of the Afternoon* (codirected by Alexander Hammid), released in 1943, is a poetic and haunting cinematic experience shot with a hand-wound Bolex camera in 16 mm. Made entirely outside the classical Hollywood dream factory's narrative-bound conventions, Deren's film was a wartime political act.

Eggshells was made in the same spirit and under the same conditions—independently, outside the Hollywood system, using a portable Éclair NPR 16 mm camera. Like Coleman's improvised jazz variations, Hooper's film is about the intensity of improvisation and the experience of becoming, insofar as the film immerses the viewer in the trips of a "mad" experimenter. Experimentation in the film offers freedom and potential for the viewer. In moments like the sudden appearance of the entity in the house without establishing shots, or the flaming up of a paper plane in the same scene, Hooper creates possibilities for newness and spontaneity. *Eggshells* envelops the viewer in spontaneity through nonnarrative immersiveness. The house is not simply a setting or even a character; it is corporeal, linked with the flesh of the viewer. Experimentation is not simply a theme in *Eggshells*, but also the drug trip itself, and a challenge to the notion of subject-object.

CINEMASOCHISM

On the commentary track to *Eggshells*, Hooper discusses it as a narrative that is quite well structured. As a viewer, I do not experience this, because the film works consistently against the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema. In the scene described above, when the viewer is introduced to the house, what typically would be a simple establishing shot becomes instead a strategy to immerse the viewer in the intensity of communal living as protest, rather than representing it holistically. In this way, the film asks not to be read but experienced. *Eggshells* resists the idea of the film as a representation (a meaning-making object) that exists to be understood, decoded. Rather, it courts the kind of masochistic relationship between cinema—especially horror cinema—and spectator in which audiences surrender to potentially self-shattering openness. For Patricia MacCormack, “cinemasochism asks not what an image means, but rather, what it does—the spectator begs of the image, ‘use me’” (2010, 157). Cinematic images are not (necessarily or always) signs that need (semiotic, structuralist, psychoanalytical, ideological) decoding. An experimental film such as *Eggshells* offers a way to understand a more fully embodied cinema, since the film is constructed in ways that eschew the analytical lure of cognitive processing, opening the audience to being “used” by the filmmaker. Hooper replicates this strategy in his second film, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, though with increasing gestures toward the narrative structures of classical Hollywood. Whereas *Texas Chain Saw* is an adrenaline trip, *Eggshells* is an acid trip. Both take the spectator to deadly new frontiers. In the trip, subject-object borders disappear.

Dominique Legrand’s smart and concise introduction to Hooper’s cinema, *Les Territoires Interdits de Tobe Hooper* (The Forbidden Territories of Tobe Hooper, 2017), discusses the main themes of Hooper’s career in relation to his first film: “From *Eggshells*, the house is like a cocoon, a matrix, and trying to escape is always risky. At the heart of this place resides a border between two communities. This notion of the border, this line of separation, is at the heart of the cinema of Tobe Hooper. It is in fact quintessential to his oeuvre” (95).⁸ I want to link Legrand’s notion of the cocoon with the notion of becoming in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. For Deleuze and Guattari, becoming is a state of constant change and potential in the world. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, the authors discuss the concept of becoming-animal in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* as well as in works by H. P. Lovecraft and Franz Kafka. On Lovecraft’s Weird short story, “The Outsider” (1921), for example, they write: “Lovecraft applies the term ‘Outsider’ to this thing or entity, the Thing, which arrives and passes at the edge, which is linear yet multiple, ‘teeming, seething, swelling, foaming, spreading like an infectious disease, this nameless horror’” ([1980] 1987, 245). Lovecraft, they

argue, is, like Kafka, a master of becoming and thus a master of the border, of becoming-other. Becoming is bordering, in their terms, and borders are likewise an important theme in Hooper's work.

Like the experience of affect, becoming is relational. Legrand's notion of the house in *Eggshells* being a cocoon is linked with becoming, because becoming is itself the spectatorial experience of the film. MacCormack writes of that kind of experience: "Becoming is not 'like' or 'as' the other term. Becoming is a movement rather than a project towards which a goal is identified" (2016, 34). In *Eggshells*, the spectatorial experience of becoming is a form of trip that creates Lovecraftian mutations.

Deleuze and Guattari conjure up the presence of sorcerers, who "have always held anomalous positions, at the edge of fields or woods. They haunt the fringes" ([1980] 1987, 246). For Deleuze and Guattari, the sorcerer is the liminal person par excellence, and they use the word *an-omalie* (from the Greek "anomalos," meaning "uneven") to mean "the cutting-edge of deterritorialization" (244). This sorcerer is the "crypto-embryonic hyper-electric presence" who lives in the basement in *Eggshells*, just as he lives in other in-between worlds. The sorcerer as border crosser reappears in Hooper's career, and he-she-it is often nameless, like the hitchhiker in *Texas Chain Saw* or the barker in *The Funhouse* (1981), but sometimes named, like Chas Rooker, the elderly man who lived the history of the apartment building at the center of *Toolbox Murders* (2004). These characters are not only omens who warn, but also border keepers who open up boundaries into the visceral ecology of Hooper's world: the terrible house onto which Sally and her friends stumble, the dreadful freak show to which Amy and her friends are drawn, and the occult history of the apartment building that lures Nell and her husband. These films have essentially the same becoming-house dynamic, and they function to slowly immerse the characters in the ecology of fear that is the cinemasochism of Hooper's oeuvre more generally. In *Eggshells*, the becoming-house is articulated in the techniques of the avant-garde that Hooper uses throughout as a "mad" experimenter (a kind of sorcerer) immersing his viewers—just as his friends and characters are immersed—in the issues of their time.

HUIS CLOS EXPERIMENTATION

The likening of Hooper to a kind of mad scientist is apropos here, tying Hooper's cinematic experimentations to his cinephilia. Hooper remembered watching *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Terence Fisher, 1957) as a child, and he began to set up labs and play mad scientist. He stated, "I also thought I might become a mad scientist because I got into being a magician, too. I got to play dates and

birthday parties in Austin” (Hooper 2017). Like Peter Cushing as Victor Frankenstein, Hooper became the experimental sorcerer, continuing to experiment with ways of immersing his audience in a synesthetic experience. *Texas Chain Saw* is an experimental film, employing many of the techniques of avant-garde experimentation mentioned above—including a sound design even more adventurous than the one in *Eggshells*. Hooper’s experiments in both films call for postrepresentational readings, which are not interested in the content of a film as an object of analysis, so much as in the spectatorial experience of it. This is not to say that anything goes in this analysis, but that the cinematic experience is always relational. MacCormack states that “freedom of images comes from the spectator and not from the images’ content” (2016, 15). She continues, “Rather than extreme images being unethical because they show gore and perversion, these images can be understood as involving a more ethical mode of spectatorship” (65). Postrepresentational readings reframe the idea that a film like *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, for example, presents the ongoing torture of and violence against Sally by the family as misogynistic content, reminding one, rather, that the viewer is masochistically tormented in relation to her corporeal experience. While *Eggshells* has no gore or torture, it is a film that similarly embodies in its very structure and style the experimental “perversions” of nonnormative sex and drug taking, carried forward from the visceral protest in the film’s opening scene. With both films, the subject-object binary is challenged, and the viewer is put into affective relation with the materiality of the film’s intensities. For MacCormack, “cinesexuals,” all of us who are passionate about cinema, give themselves to these images “as a submission before the film” (11).

Mad scientists give themselves over entirely to their experiments, often losing themselves, as in James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931), which is structured around the relation between Henry’s (very queer) experiments and his unsuccessful attempt at conventional heterosexual marriage. Hooper’s experience with *Eggshells* is a cinesexual one in the literal sense, since he lived in the communal house that served as the film’s shooting location for nine months and spent the same amount of time editing the film after shooting it. Hooper in some sense is literally in bed with his actors, shooting them having sex, waking up, smoking, or using long takes to film politically charged discussions about communism between Amy and David in a bathtub. Hooper includes a scene of their marriage, presided over by a rabbi, later in the film, thereby documenting the Otherness of Austin, with its political and religious diversity. In the sex scene between Toes and Mahlon Foreman, whom the viewer meets in the opening scene in a pickup truck as she is making her way to Austin, Hooper shoots through stretched Mylar (polyester film used to make transparencies)



Figure 8.2. Amy (Amy Lester) and David (David Noll) together in the fragile comfort of the eggshell in *Eggshells* (Tobe Hooper, 1969).

to create a four-minute tantric trip, underscored by music from Shiva's Headband. Toes says: "Do you want to fuck?" and Mahlon responds: "You bet!" They are removing paint from their naked chests. Hooper renders the scene's corporeal abstractions via a mixture of pixilation and dissolves, and a zoom with an Angénieux 12/120 lens, moving in and out to show Mylar-distorted and mostly out-of-focus silhouetted body sculpting in hues of pink, green, and red. Bodies crash over each other, abstractly mutating into movement, with washes of light that are electric, similar to the close-ups of equipment in *Frankenstein* as sparks fly in the laboratory where two men are creating life. The trip of the mad scientist is the trip of creation and possibilities. In Hooper's experimental sex scene, the trip is exactly the same, and like the queer Henry in Whale's movie, it is a nonnormative experiment in becoming.

In an uncanny foreshadowing of the ending of *Texas Chain Saw*, the film begins with Mahlon getting into the back of an old pickup truck and seemingly moving to the big city. The hand waving of a family member who runs after the truck suggests a grand departure. Before this scene, abstract, golden images show silhouetted birds in the sky. There is a zoom in on a school bus. The sound of birds is overwhelming, evoking a sense of strangeness about the space. A folk-style guitar appears on the soundtrack as Hooper cuts to a close-up of a license plate, "ID-1158, Texas, 1970," then a long shot of the truck leaving. Then Hooper, who is behind the camera, gets into the truck, and suddenly the viewer is immersed in Mahlon's world. Hooper cuts to her suitcase. Despite the parallels, such imagery is a far cry from the traumatic ending of *Texas Chain Saw*, in which Sally sobs hysterically as she is finally driven away in a pickup from the family that tormented her, her overwhelming relief matched by the frustration of Leatherface, swinging his chain saw maniacally on an open highway.

In fact, the ending of *Eggshells* seems light and airy in tone, by comparison

with that of *Texas Chain Saw*: Toes, Mahlon, the sorcerer, and his new mate, Pam, disappear in the *Frankenstein*-like hair-salon-type apparatus of the “crypto-embryonic hyper-electric” presence conjured up in the basement, and dissolve into vapor. These four unmarried youths are the only people from the house whose relationships still lie outside the normative. Is the last shot of vapor or smoke? Is the viewer witnessing the misty beauty of freedom, suggested earlier by Pam’s colored balloons, as they seek to escape their trapped states? Or is this smoke from the killing fields of Vietnam? The Kent State University shooting of four students by the Ohio National Guard on May 4, 1970, during antiwar protests happened only a few months after *Eggshells* was completed. The ending is decidedly ambiguous. An eggshell is a fragile, immersive covering protecting something embryonic that is equally fragile. Freedom is also fragile. Kent State reminds one of the fragility of freedom. The simultaneous fragility and comfort of the eggshell is depicted in the film in a beautiful scene in which Amy and David are shown in a field under a Plexiglas dome, having intimate fun (fig. 8.2).

In this film about openness to experimentation, the spectator is left with a sense of dread, of being trapped in the structures of heteronormativity. Is the soon-to-be-married couple trapped in the conformity that married life can bring? Is their marriage in the film a bow to conformity? The tactility and rigidity of the dome—its lack of flexibility as they transport it to the field—embodies this experience of being both protected and trapped. Recall the coffin at the antiwar protest, which depicts the United States as a necropolis. Conformity is death in *Eggshells*. In Tobe Hooper’s cinema, the dread of being trapped in a necropolis is central, obvious, and visceral in *Texas Chain Saw*, *Eaten Alive*, *The Funhouse*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986), *The Mangler* (1995), and *Toolbox Murders*. *Eggshells* figures significantly among these works as an embodiment of the cinemasochistic experience of being immersed in the “crypto-embryonic hyper-electric” sorcery of Tobe Hooper, and in the necropolis that is the United States.

NOTES

1. Some characters have fictional names and some use their own names. Allen Danziger (real name) played the van-driving Jerry in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.
2. Hooper (2017) says on the commentary track that the actor’s name is Vince Gorsick (transliterated).
3. Handwritten production notes on *Eggshells* include the phrases “All Fuck All Take Bath” and “Why are David and Amy getting married, asks Toes—a question of values about Middle Class Conventions.” Also, written in all capital letters and underlined several times: “MAKE THE FILM GROOVY TO WATCH” (Hooper n.d. [1969]).

4. I am using the term “nonconscious” in order to avoid psychoanalytic terms such as unconscious.

5. In the United States, the film was released on Blu-ray by the University of Texas Press, along with Tobe Hooper’s short films *The Heisters* (1964) and *Down Friday Street* (1970). This version is now unavailable because of technical glitches.

6. In all, Whitman killed seventeen people. Earlier on the day of the massacre, he stabbed his mother and his wife to death. The seventeenth victim died thirty-five years later of injuries sustained in the shooting.

7. A similar, more sinister phrase, “Labor Makes You Free,” figures prominently in Hooper’s *The Mangler* (1995).

8. All translations from the French are my own.

LIZARD BRAIN OUROBOROS

Human Antiexceptionalism in Tobe Hooper's
Eaten Alive and *Crocodile*

MIKE THORN

IN HIS TWO CROCODILE-FOCUSED HORROR films, *Eaten Alive* (1976) and *Crocodile* (2000), Tobe Hooper explores the distinctions in consciousness between human and nonhuman animals. The director maximizes his crocodile characters to underline implicit thematic interests in reptilian (or triune) brain theory. While neither film deals expressly with this theory, they both draw from cursory (or unconscious) understandings of the culturally familiar “lizard brain” concept to illustrate parallels between the human and nonhuman animal. As such, it is worth contextualizing the origins of the term, which was formalized by the American physician and neuroscientist Paul D. MacLean in the 1960s and later popularized in his 1990 book *The Triune Brain in Evolution*. In essence, the theory suggests that human cognition’s roots can be traced to the nonhuman animal world (Cory 2000, 386). By drawing on the concept of animal anteriority within human consciousness, both *Eaten Alive* and *Crocodile* trouble many of the customary tropes found in animal horror cinema, specifically recurring narratives depicting animals “commit[ting] transgression[s] against humanity and . . . suffer[ing] punishment as a consequence” (Gregersdotter, Hoöglund, and Hållén 2015, 3). In fact, Hooper’s crocodile films demonstrate genre-codified arguments against human exceptionalism, a notion that posits humanity’s cognitive and individual uniqueness, especially in relation to nonhuman animals (Finlay and Workman 2013, 199). This line of thought leads easily into positioning humankind as superior to nonhuman animals and thus entitled to exercise dominion over their bodies and ecological environments. To differing extents and in different modes, *Eaten Alive* and *Crocodile* exemplify their human characters’ basest, id-driven characteristics while also reflecting on their central animals’ perceptual apparatuses and nonhuman systems of ethics. Thus, these films use the triune brain model not as an endpoint but rather as an entry into critiquing human exceptionalism.

While these films employ the animal horror genre's fundamental fear "of being eaten by the animal, of being consumed—the fear of finding ourselves in a situation where our position as the apex predator is challenged" (Gegersdotter, Hoöglund, and Hållén 2015, 9), they do not do so without significant reflexivity and subversion. Indeed, by suggesting cognitive proximity between human and crocodile, both films' narrative structures apply yet another reptilian metaphoric model—the ouroboros. That is, if the human characters in *Eaten Alive* and *Crocodile* are predominantly defined by their triune brain behaviors, then the films ultimately depict those characters being consumed by the physical manifestations of their own cognitive anteriority (the still-present animal traces of their psychology), much like the ouroboros snake eating its tail. This subversive narrative strategy is further complicated when read through genre theories that suggest horror plays a role in satiating our triune brain urges (for example, Stephen King's comment that horror serves to "keep the gators fed" [2012, 527]). If, at its basest function, horror cinema feeds the "lizard brain," then Hooper's films visually represent the genre's operations to demonstrate how horror also devours us, forcing us to confront that which we repress or deny in our own natures.

"NO DISTINCTIONS" BETWEEN HUMAN AND NONHUMAN ANIMALS IN *EATEN ALIVE*

It is useful to consider the similarities and differences between *Eaten Alive* and *Crocodile*, not only between their animal and human characters, but also between their roles in Tobe Hooper's oeuvre. Released two years after *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *Eaten Alive* centers on a war veteran named Judd who manages a rundown Florida hotel called the Starlight. Seemingly motivated purely by repressed libidinal and violent compulsions, Judd murders numerous hotel guests throughout the film and feeds them to a crocodile he keeps in a moat surrounding the establishment. With Judd at its forefront, *Eaten Alive* focuses intently on sexual lust and physical aggression, privileging its characters' compulsions over standard, dramatic psychological motivations. The film employs this style of characterization to supplement its primary conceit of destabilizing human exceptionalism, achieved through emphasis on the triune brain as an engine for human impulse and behavior. Indeed, the film gestures to this concept at the outset, beginning with a center-framed shot of the moon that cross-fades into the sun-shaped buckle over the crotch of a brothel customer named Buck: "Name's Buck and I'm rarin' to fuck!" the man says. Moments later, he attempts to rape a sex worker named Clara. It is crucial that Hooper leads into this horrific introduction with an image of the



Figure 9.1. Red light and cages putting human and nonhuman animals on common ground in *Eaten Alive* (Tobe Hooper, Mars Productions Corporation, 1976).

sun overarching Buck's genitals. Visually connected with the ludic implications of moonlight and the scene's nighttime setting, the sun's proximity to Buck's phallic violence suggests an argument made by Georges Bataille, who reads the sun as humanity's cosmic puppet master. As interpreted by Nick Land, Bataille argues that "light—the sun—produces us, animates us, and engenders our excess," and that "this animation [is] the effect of the light (we are basically nothing but an effect of the sun)" (Land 1992, 27). This visual metaphor thus sets a foundation for the film's grim biological essentialism, flagging its human characters as subordinate to both animalistic urges and atavistic forces.

Throughout *Eaten Alive*, Hooper maximizes visual cues and performance styles to further illustrate the connection between human and nonhuman animals (fig. 9.1). In the scene after Judd murders Clara, his first victim, and feeds

her body to the crocodile, Hooper cuts to a monkey sitting in a cage and panging at the ground.¹ As with many of the film's compositions, Hooper drowns this frame in red-gel light; this visual characteristic aligns not only with the Judeo-Christian religious implications of the color red's alignment with sin, but also with its relationship to dominance-signaling in human and nonhuman animals (Little and Hill 2007, 166). More specifically, the film emphasizes the color red to highlight its preoccupation with cognitive determinism. This determinism plays out through visual proximity and parallels: Hooper accompanies the image of the monkey with the sounds of animal cries, cutting to a wide shot of Judd singing drunkenly in his room, red light bleeding through the window. Hooper continues cutting back and forth between Judd's incoherent singing and the caged monkey before cutting to a shot of the crocodile's body rising from the pond. The wordless sequence ends with the monkey keeling over in its cage and lying still. Here, the monkey suggests the role of evolution in human behavior, bridging the imagistic contrast between Judd and the crocodile awaiting their next prey. Hooper further illustrates the human-animal connection through a carefully woven sound design, mingling a soundtrack of birdsong and animal cries with a seemingly endless procession of country songs played on the radio. As the film progresses, the incessant country music develops a toneless, nearly subliminal, unconscious quality, mingling with the animal sounds to suggest an implicit connection between human and nonhuman expression.

Hooper signals triune brain traits not only in *Eaten Alive*'s "villains," but also in Roy, one of the Starlight's guests and eventual victims. After the crocodile eats his daughter's dog, Roy and his wife, Faye, hide in their hotel room to regroup. Roy repeatedly says, "I'm so sorry this whole thing happened," his voice shrill and frantic. As Roy rambles, Hooper cuts to a close-up of Faye's face, her expression blank and detached before she turns away from her husband, clearly in no mood for his hysterics. Hooper frames a medium close-up of Roy's trembling, panicked expression. As he extends his hand toward his wife, forming a fist and releasing an anguished, inhuman wail, the shot pans closer to his quivering face. The actor William Finley performs this scene with exaggerated and near-comic physicality, expressing his character's susceptibility to succumb to "uncivilized" behavior. It is worth noting that immediately before this sequence, Hooper depicts Judd delivering a thinly veiled monologue about the connections between human and crocodile; as he descends the stairs, Judd repeats a phrase he has used to justify the crocodile's behavior throughout the film—"he makes no distinctions."² Now, Judd wears an expression of teary-eyed, terrified realization as he says, "There ain't none. There ain't no distinctions. Distinctions . . . none at all. You've got to do what you've

got to do.” This emphasis on distinctions gestures not only to the crocodile’s choice of prey (whether human or dog, “innocent” or “guilty”), but also to the blurry lines between the predatory reptile and Judd himself, and furthermore between Judd and Roy.

Doubtless, it is moments like this, of such bleak and nearly unilateral determinism, that have led some critics to read the film as confirmation “that the creative impulse in Hooper’s work is centred in his monsters (here, the grotesque and pathetic Neville Brand) and [as] essentially nihilistic” (Wood 1979, 22). However, Hooper’s project here is not merely one of nihilism, but also a rather political one of destabilizing human-centric views typical within animal horror cinema, namely, those that position the animal as “hardwired to be a relentless predator, unable to show remorse or pity” (Gegersdotter, Hoöglund, and Hållén 2015, 7). Given this presupposition, animal horror cinema often posits that “the only way for humans to protect themselves against the ferociousness of the animal is to respond to it by becoming as ferocious as the animal, and to kill it” (7). With this analysis in mind, *Eaten Alive*’s conclusion clarifies Hooper’s subversive vision: the Starlight’s resident crocodile devours Judd alive, signaled by a final freeze-frame of Judd’s wooden leg rising to the surface of the moat. This is the film’s ultimate ouroboros moment, showcasing the triune-brain-driven man being devoured by the physical representation of his own reptilian, predatory nature.³ This conclusion also upends the human-centric “animal horror” trope of human characters transforming into vicious animals to match their nonhuman adversaries; in *Eaten Alive*, the human characters are always already located on a spectrum of animality.

CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN HUMAN AND ANIMAL IN *CROCODILE*

This spectrum of animality reemerges in Tobe Hooper’s straight-to-video *Crocodile* (2000), a horror film that revisits the director’s subversive interests in the myths surrounding human animal–nonhuman animal divides. Indeed, the filmmaker explored similar ideas intermittently throughout the twenty-three years that elapsed between the release of his crocodile films. *The Funhouse* (1981) depicts a dehumanized antagonist whose monstrous origins reside in repressed atrocities committed by more expressly “human” characters, a narrative that Hooper later repurposed in *The Toolbox Murders* (2004) and *Mortuary* (2005). Furthermore, *Lifeforce* (1985) and *Night Terrors* (1993) depict libidinal urges as unstoppably consumptive forces, and *The Apartment Complex* (1999) illustrates parallels between a human community and an anthill. *Crocodile* came one year after *The Apartment Complex*’s television premiere; it features less widespread condemnation of its characters and wholesale carnage than

that seen in *Eaten Alive*, but like its crocodile-centric predecessor, its narrative revolves around its characters' basest "lizard brain" urges and the dynamic between human and nonhuman animals. *Crocodile* advances its ideas by dealing expressly with animal-rights issues and by tracking the actions of its titular reptile in accordance with a quasi-human system of reasoning. That is, unlike the crocodile in *Eaten Alive*, *Crocodile*'s title character does "make distinctions" between who she does and does not eat; specifically, this reptile targets those who infringe on her territory and her young.

The film thus creates a unique dynamic whereby its animal character appears more "human" and its reckless, ecosystem-trampling human characters more "animalistic," closing the gap between the two and enhancing the narrative's ouroboros structure. Following a group of college friends who take a weekend vacation on a remote lake in Southern California during spring break, *Crocodile* emphasizes the young adults' indulgence in physical pleasures, "drink[ing] enormous quantities of alcohol, smok[ing] pot, and even steal[ing] each other's boyfriends" (Muir [2002] 2015, 139). The film's plot kicks into motion in a crucial crosscut sequence wherein one of the friends, Kit, relays a local legend: in the early nineteenth century, a hotel owner showcased a crocodile named Flat Dog at his nearby establishment. (Of course, the link between crocodile and hotel further underlines the film's connection with *Eaten Alive*.)⁴ The hotel keeper allegedly built a shrine in Flat Dog's name, deeming her a representative of the ancient Egyptian crocodile god Sobek. Kit says the hotelkeeper created a crocodile-worshipping cult before he was driven out of town by superstitious locals, who burned down the hotel years later.

As Hooper lays down this folkloric framework, he cuts periodically to two fishermen, Arnold and Harvey, destroying a crocodile's nest. The two men embody primal, human-exceptionalist personas; Arnold yells, "Cocksucking animal rights!" as he kicks down a Wildlife Preserve sign, which he dismisses as "hippy bullshit." Moments later, his friend Harvey stomps on a small animal that scurries beneath the frame, crushing it to death. The men then demolish the crocodile's eggs before they are summarily devoured by the angry mother, Flat Dog. The scene concludes with an explicit depiction of Flat Dog's "human intelligence" as she pushes the men's car into the water, "destroying the evidence" (Muir [2002] 2015, 140). These men are the first of the film's many fatalities, but Flat Dog does not target the college-aged protagonists until they too threaten her young. In search of Princess, a dog belonging to one of the college women (Claire), two of her friends, Duncan and Hubs, stumble across Flat Dog's nest and steal one of her eggs. This event, in conjunction with the aforementioned fishermen scene, sets the plot into motion while also laying bare Flat Dog's quasi humanness.



Figure 9.2. *Crocodile* (Tobe Hooper, Nu Image / Trimark Home Video, 2000).

Indeed, the film sidesteps readings of Flat Dog's behavior as mere consequences of "instinct." *Crocodile* aligns Flat Dog's actions with familiar human characteristics: namely, the need to protect her territory and her young. Thus, the film presents a monster with not only a maternal instinct, but also a canny and humanlike sense of how to cover her tracks. This aspect of the film is especially important when assessing its subversive interests; consider the argument that in animal horror cinema, the animal monster—"say, the shark in *Jaws*—typically exists beyond the ethical, as do other familiar characters in horror cinema, such as zombies, monsters and psychopathic killers" (Gregersdotter, Hoöglund, and Hållén 2015, 7).⁵ *Crocodile* upends this trope by depicting several of its human characters' ethical defects and their lack of compassion for nonhuman animal cohabitants while simultaneously justifying its animal's violence in the name of self-defense.

In both *Eaten Alive* and *Crocodile*, a "large portion of the *dramatis personae* seem to signify base desires and instinct" (Muir [2002] 2015, 72–73). The films also share an interest in biological determinism, with Hooper identifying *Crocodile* explicitly as "a film about survival . . . of the fittest" (54). *Crocodile* plays out its Darwinian ideas not only through the physical conflict between humans and reptiles, but also through its characters' relentless carnal desires. As in *Eaten Alive*, the majority of *Crocodile*'s male characters act in accordance to a harmful sexual drive. Whereas *Eaten Alive* links its sexual preoccupations with the hotel keeper Judd's depraved puritanism (and the violent punishment he metes out accordingly), *Crocodile* connects its male characters' sexual appetites with their

destructive acts against nonhuman animals. When Duncan first encounters the crocodile's nest, he surveys the eggs and shouts, "Talk about getting laid!" Moments later, he stuffs one of the eggs down his pants. When he returns to his friends, he uses the egg vulgarly to flirt with one of the women, Sunny; he presents the egg to her and says, "That was in my crotch." Moments later, as he and Hubs pass the egg back and forth, Claire says, "I can't believe you two—for all you know, that could be an endangered species." Duncan responds yet again by connecting the egg with his own obsession with libidinal power; "You know, Claire, the egg is a symbol of fertility," he says. "Perhaps you find that threatening?" Ultimately, the characters in *Crocodile* are not "punished" for their sexual "misdeeds" (Hooper is no puritan reactionary); on the contrary, Flat Dog leaves the survivors unscathed when they finally return her young (fig. 9.2).

FEEDING THE CROCODILE: *EATEN ALIVE* AND *CROCODILE* FIND THE CROCODILE WITHIN US

Tobe Hooper's crocodile-themed films exhibit more nuanced ideas than simply exacting penalties on characters for their libidinal excesses. To differing extents, the films depict people suffering comeuppance for their unharnessed urges, hunted and consumed by the physical manifestations of their triune brains. Importantly, Hooper links this comeuppance to the follies of human exceptionalism (especially in *Crocodile*), calling into question many of the assumptions embedded in animal horror cinema. *Crocodile* makes a bold gesture by connecting its human characters primarily with selfishly destructive tendencies (especially in relation to their ecological environment) while depicting its animal "monster" mostly as a protective mother. If we can interpret the reptiles in both *Eaten Alive* and *Crocodile* as representations of the human characters' "lizard brain" characteristics, then we can see in both films an example of people being consumed by that which they repress within themselves: thus, the reptile-themed ouroboros symbol applies readily to both films' plot structures. The films' ouroboros structures develop another dimension when read through a theory of horror foregrounding the genre's necessity for "feeding" our repressed reptilian urges. Consider Stephen King's argument that the "most aggressive" horror cinema lifts "a trap door in the civilized forebrain and throw[s] a basket of raw meat to the hungry alligators swimming around in that subterranean river beneath"; King asserts that this is a necessary exercise precisely because it "keep[s] the [unconscious] gators fed" (2012, 527). King's reflection is useful here given its explicitly reptile-centric metaphor, but it also extends many of Robin Wood's theories about the horror genre's negotiations with repression. Wood proposes that basic repression, the sort of necessary

self-regulation that prevents us from acting unquestioningly on self-serving urges, “makes us distinctively human, capable of directing our own lives and co-existing with others” (1979, 8). Conversely, he identifies surplus repression as a socially mandated system seeking to subordinate our natural sexual energy in the interest of converting us into “monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists (‘bourgeois’ even if we are born into the proletariat, for we are talking here of ideological norms rather than material status)” (8). Wood proposes that horror cinema provides a vital means of expressing and subverting this surplus repression.

Certainly, *Eaten Alive* and *Crocodile* concern themselves with repression, their crocodile characters representing humanity’s animality rising from the unconscious. The films force us to confront that which the ubiquitous doctrine of human exceptionalism calls us to deny within ourselves, while also highlighting the triune brain characteristics of their genre. Both *Eaten Alive* and *Crocodile* advance Wood’s tenet that “what is hated in others is what is rejected (but nonetheless continues to exist) within the self,” calling viewers to question their own human exceptionalism (1979, 10). Hooper maximizes this concept by way of his films’ ouroboros structures, through the narrative and psychological circularity of their violence. By enclosing his ideas within these films’ unique triune brain–ouroboros cycles, Hooper shows us how horror cinema can and does “feed the gators,” as King describes. Thus, *Eaten Alive* and *Crocodile* demand that we confront their genre’s function: how can we satiate the lizard brain without allowing it to “consume” us? And where, precisely, can we locate the divisions between human and nonhuman animals? To that end, should we attempt to locate such divisions? Hooper’s films argue that the distinction is much less clear than our human-exceptionalist societies would like us to believe.

NOTES

1. Thanks to Kristopher Woofert for noting how Hooper employs a similar strategy in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* when Pam stumbles into the Sawyer family’s living room. As Pam surveys an array of furniture fashioned from both human and nonhuman animal bones, this sequence emphasizes the lack of distinction between the two. The scene includes a crucial shot of a chicken trapped in a cage, making a suggestive gesture between the human and nonhuman animals trapped in the same space.

2. Hooper concerned himself with distinctions between human and nonhuman animals repeatedly throughout his career, most notably in his *Texas Chainsaw* films. Consider again the Sawyer family’s furniture, constructed of human and nonhuman animal bones in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*; consider also *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*’s chili-making contest scene, in which the Sawyer clan serves up the winning recipe, which consists of human flesh masquerading as cow flesh.

3. The film suffered a similar fate, given reports that Hooper’s artistic intentions

were undercut by his producers' "lizard brain" demands for more unwarranted nudity. Indeed, Hooper's fear that his project was being turned into a soft-core porn picture led him to leave "the film before principal photography was complete" (Muir [2002] 2015, 19).

4. Indeed, the abandoned hotel at the center of *Crocodile*'s proceedings might be read as a kind of further-degenerated Starlight. This plot- and setting-specific connection positions *Crocodile* as a coda on the topics raised explicitly by *Eaten Alive*. (Thank you to my editors for further stressing this link.) It is also worth noting that Hooper employs folklore elements to illustrate *Crocodile*'s more generalized, widespread "American" traits; the director notes that "every town in America seems to have some story of a lake or woods with a monster in it" (Crow 2000, 53).

5. In addition to Hooper's film, there are several noteworthy cinematic exceptions to this form of "animal monster." Consider *Jaws: The Revenge* (Joseph Sargent, 1987), in which, as the tagline reads, "This time, it's personal." *Squirm* (Jeff Lieberman, 1976) portrays its worms enacting a kind of "environmental revenge." These are two among many such counterexamples to the assertion by Gregersdotter, Hoöglund, and Hållén (2015).

"SEX OR THE SAW, BOY, WHAT'S IT GONNA BE?"

Tobe Hooper's Anxious Men

WILL DODSON

THESE DAYS, TERRORISTS, TROLLS, AND Trumpers fill our media-fueled nightmares. "Toxic masculinity" is a key phrase of our age, a new term for an old thing.¹ In 2009, HBO released the documentary *Right America: Feeling Wronged* (Alexandra Pelosi, 2009), which was shot in the months leading up to Barack Obama's election victory and inauguration.² As the title suggests, the filmmakers interviewed conservative voters, primarily supporters of the presidential candidate John McCain. One man (fig. 10.1), interviewed at a NASCAR race in Concord, North Carolina, chokes up in tears as he laments:

It used to be one time we was top dog, and now we're nothing. Illegal immigrants come in here and they get all the rights, and we got nothing. Try asking the government for help and they're gonna tell you go fuck yourself. But let a foreigner come in this country, and . . . [he trails off] [. . .] It's nothing but a big gigantic ripoff. [. . .] It used to be a hell of a good country, at one time. I just don't know what the hell happened.

By "we," he meant specifically working- and middle-class white men. The rage characterizing today's polarized America has been intensifying for decades, accelerated during the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama administrations, and seems to have metastasized in the Trump era. This long buildup of white male anxiety, despair, and, finally, rage forms a primary current in the cinema of Tobe Hooper, who came of age in the civil rights era and died two weeks after the "Unite the Right" march in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Toxic masculinity derives from thwarted expectations.³ A pop evolutionary-biological perspective tells us that boys and men naturally compete for status and resources, including mates, sublimating their emotions and cultivating



Figure 10.1. Feeling ripped off and left behind in *Right America: Feeling Wronged* (Alexandra Pelosi, HBO, 2009).

their aggression. That emotionally stunted aggression gets shunted toward the “weak,” namely, women, queer communities, and racial and ethnic minorities, especially when things don’t work out as men think they are supposed to. The definition is well rehearsed but worth foregrounding here as a preamble to Hooper’s particular and consistent depictions of men, specifically white working- and middle-class men. His most common characters are impotent cuckolds, oblivious blowhards, and, finally, desiccated shells. They are out of place, sexually confused, and violence prone. The American Dream has atrophied and rotted, leaving broken men all over the landscape; Hooper’s examples include *Leatherface* and his brothers as well as the gimps populating *The Funhouse* (1981), *Toolbox Murders* (2004), and *Mortuary* (2005). The traditional patriarchal order and its prescribed roles break down in Tobe Hooper’s films. Men are free but lack choices. What is their place in the world, and how do they achieve (or regain) it?

These questions, and the attendant sense of entitlement, apply not only to rural, conservative men but also to the liberal and urbane. In July 2019, as the editors were compiling this book and searching for a copy of Hooper’s documentary *Peter, Paul and Mary: The Song Is Love* (1970, 1971), the *New York Times* reported that Peter Yarrow, then age eighty-one, had been uninvited to an arts festival in Norwich, New York, because of online backlash about his 1970 conviction for indecent acts with a minor. Yarrow did not protest the festival’s decision and expressed contrition for his “most reprehensible and deeply regretted sexual offense.” He said, “It was an era of real indiscretion and mistakes by categorically male performers. I was one of them. I got nailed. I was wrong. I’m sorry for it” (Rojas 2019). The crime involved answering his door,

naked, to a seventeen- and a fourteen-year-old, fans who had come to his hotel room for an autograph, and making sexual advances and having sexual contact with the girls. While Yarrow's contrition is certainly welcome, the way he frames it is troubling, and not just within a contemporary, #MeToo context. His explanation sheds light on a sense of male sexual entitlement underwritten by twisted ideas of "artistic" celebrity and "sexual revolution."

Yet it would be naïve to suggest that Yarrow's description of the "era of real indiscretion" was insincere. In a 1995 interview with the *Phoenix New Times*, his bandmate Paul Stookey commented on Yarrow's conviction: "In the late Sixties, the desire to be close to a performer was evidencing itself, but there weren't categories at that time. I think Peter unfortunately got caught in a shift of perception in what was allowable. Who knew from groupies? Rock 'n' roll was still new. You didn't have the kind of abuses you see now chronicled on HBO, where it shows how KISS auditions their dancing girls—'How much can you show us and what can you do with it?'" (Dominic 1995).⁴ This is an odd sort of excuse, that Yarrow was "caught in a shift of perception in what was allowable," as though the surging popularity of rock music and the existence of groupie culture somehow confused Yarrow into thinking it would be okay to have a threesome with minors. To what categories does Stookey refer? While there is some comfort in the fact that Yarrow was charged, convicted, served time, apologized, and accepted periodic backlash with remorse, it remains the case that both his and Stookey's public statements imply that Yarrow's actions were in some way mitigated by circumstances beyond his control and understanding. It is impossible to determine what, if anything, Tobe Hooper knew about Yarrow's crime and conviction. Regardless, Yarrow is a real-world corollary to many of Hooper's sexually confused men who don't know what's "allowable," including several of the characters in *Eggshells*, Colonel Carlsen in *Lifeforce* (1985), and Stan Warden in *The Apartment Complex* (1999). Sexual confusion, despair, and rage are of a piece with both categorical (male) and economic instability in Hooper's cinema.

COWBOYS, CANNIBALS, AND CUCKS

Even Hooper's early short *The Heisters* (1964) rests on the premise of anxious, frustrated men. The title card of the ten-minute film reads, "This theatre is proud to announce that the following presentation is ridiculous." What follows is a farce equally influenced by Hammer pictures, the Three Stooges, and Wile E. Coyote. A trio of criminals escapes to a Gothically appointed underground lair, where they argue in pantomime over the division of their spoils. A cigar-chomping crook attacks one of his partners when he feels he has not



Figure 10.2. Sitting on a powder keg in *The Heisters* (Tobe Hooper, A William H. Production, 1964).

gotten his due. His compatriot placates him by calling in a group of scantily clad dancing women and trading him an opulent jewel for his gold coins. When the women leave and the jewel is revealed to be nothing more than carved ice, the cigar chomper challenges his former partner to a duel involving cream pies. The cigar chomper misses his throw, but then attempts a “nuclear option,” a giant cream pie, which blows up in his face. Undaunted, he continues the fight with various weapons and gags. All the while, the third heister has been experimenting with ways to kill an insect, and finally blows up the lair with barrels of gunpowder (fig. 10.2). The three men are, as the title card notes, ridiculous. Their inability to communicate and collaborate with one another, not to mention consider consequences, leads to their comical demise.

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (1974) is not so different in theme. The murderous family has been cast adrift after the automation of the slaughterhouse where they worked. Grandpa can barely hold his hammer. The Cook is older, a confirmed bachelor. The Hitchhiker is a raspberry-blowing adolescent, and Leatherface seems to be genderqueer, changing faces as he performs feminine roles in the kitchen or masculine ones when he wields his saw. They fight among themselves to assert or expand their roles. Ultimately, like the heisters, they are anachronistic, out of time, a rusted trap for young Sally and her friends to step into.

Eaten Alive (1976) solidifies these toxic expressions. Buck—with his cult catchphrase, “Name’s Buck, and I’m rarin’ to fuck”—embodies adolescent hormonal aggression. The disturbed Roy spends much of his time crying and blubbering, to the chagrin and, ultimately, peril of his wife and young daughter. Harvey is cold and rigid as he searches for his own daughter, poor, dead Clara,

who turned to prostitution to escape his domineering house. And the mad, shell-shocked veteran, Judd, mutters Bible verses as he murders the “sinners” at his hotel and feeds them to his crocodile.

Hooper’s men, who are often humiliated and traumatized, either lash out or go catatonic. *Salem’s Lot* (1979) features no fewer than three cuckolds. First, the truck driver Cully Sawyer catches his wife sleeping with her boss, the real estate weasel Larry Crockett; second, Ben Mears begins a romance with Susan Norton, leaving her boyfriend, Ned Tebbets, in the lurch; finally, Ben loses Susan to the vampire Barlow. Each cuckold reacts with violence. Cully puts a shotgun into Crockett’s mouth and pulls the trigger on an empty barrel, literally scaring the piss out of Crockett. Ned assaults Ben, sending him to the hospital. Ben stakes both Barlow and Susan. Cuckolds and “weak” men populate the film, which also features the lonely drunk Mike Ryerson, the high school drama teacher Jason Burke, and the meta-casting of Elisha Cook Jr. and Marie Windsor, recalling their beta male and femme fatale pairing in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Killing* (1956). Constable Gillespie cuts and runs, leaving town rather than confronting the source of the murders. The drunkard Father Callahan’s faith fails him against Barlow. Ben freezes and fumbles with the stakes at the crucial moment of destroying Barlow.

In these early films, Hooper locates the source of his horror in sexually awkward and economically obsolescent men. Later films, all of them low budget after the Cannon period, focus even more keenly on obsolescent and isolated men, often in middle age. What follows outlines some incarnations of male anxiety in Hooper’s film and television productions that document and predict strains of the kind of toxic masculinity that dominates contemporary American culture. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986) satirizes the trivial materialism of the Reagan era through the arrested development of its all-male Sawyer family. *Spontaneous Combustion* (1990) makes the constraints of the “nuclear” family literal, inscribed within the body of a confused and harried—and therefore combustible—man. Hooper’s contribution to HBO’s *Tales from the Crypt* series, “Dead Wait” (1991), examines impulsive violence within a noirish context of paranoid men. “Eye,” from the Showtime triptych *Body Bags* (1993; codirected by John Carpenter), depicts a man crushed by a stifling, sexually frigid suburban marriage. Finally, “The Damned Thing” (2006) from Showtime’s *Masters of Horror* series, depicts male despair in a context of economic and environmental devastation. These films track the bulk of Hooper’s career, the three decades following his disappointing box-office results for Cannon Films. After *Chainsaw 2*, Hooper primarily worked in television; the feature films he made received little or no theatrical release and therefore little critical or no academic attention. Of the works discussed here, *Chainsaw 2* is the widest ranging in its exploration

of masculine anxiety in the context of sex and capitalism and, perhaps most importantly, presents a complex woman who must negotiate the violent men of the film. Subsequent films and television works, in contrast, probe deeply into individual, solitary male characters' frustrations and anger.

"BOYS, BOYS, BOYS . . ."

In *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, the Sawyer family—Leatherface and his brothers Chop-Top and the Cook—has turned cannibalism into economic opportunity, grinding up humans and selling the meat to a public unaware of its origins but ravenous for gourmet exotica. Hooper presciently anticipates the zeitgeist of twenty-first-century foodie culture: the Sawyers sell their "slow food" gourmet meats from a food truck. The family's entrepreneurial turn brings the Sawyers, all men in stages of arrested development, into conflict with something they had never encountered before: an independent, professional woman with a drive for material success that matches their own.

The film opens with a couple of yuppies heading to a college football game. They run afoul of the Sawyers, who promptly chainsaw them during a high-speed game of chicken on the interstate. Unbeknownst to the Sawyers, audio of the murders was broadcast live on a call-in radio show, whose hostess the yuppies had been harassing on their car phone. Stretch, a DJ looking to break into major-market journalism with her coverage of the Sawyers' murders, is soon caught between the family and Lefty Enright, a vengeful Texas Ranger hell-bent on finding and killing the Sawyers at any cost.⁵ Her struggle, first to capitalize on the Sawyers and then to survive them, is complicated by Lefty, a cowboy "hero" who himself is as psychotic as the cannibals. Every character is hungry, as it were, to get ahead.

Leatherface is not genderqueer, as in the original film; encountering Stretch spurs an adolescent awakening in him. Smitten with Stretch, he shows off for her and attempts to protect her from his brothers. Chop-Top, a Vietnam veteran who drapes himself in the fashion of 1960s nostalgia, is less interested in sex than in being hip: "Muuuusic! It's my life!" he exclaims, flashing a peace sign. He is decked out in bell-bottoms and a "Sonny Bono wig," his vest covered with activist, flower power buttons. The third Sawyer, the Cook, cares only for his business, which reduces his fellow Americans to unwitting raw materials for his capitalist venture. Carol Clover notes that the killers are individuated yet tied to a repressive "sick" family that stunts their sexual maturity (1992, 27). But the family is not the only relevant influence, and the characters' masculinities are expressed not just as repressed or immature sexuality, but rather as individual, unfettered forms of materialism. Each exhibits a social context that informs

his gender performance, sexual and otherwise.

Leatherface, the sexually awakened adolescent, finds himself enticed by Stretch, for which Chop-Top ridicules him: "Bubba's got a giiiirl-friend! Bubba's got a girlfriend, Bubba's got a girlfriend!" Both "boys" are like high schoolers with sex on the brain.⁶ In the film, Leatherface corners Stretch, who is perched on a bucket of ice, and brandishes his chainsaw at her crotch. Stretch uses the protective language of women's self-defense classes. "How good are you?" she says. "You're really good, . . . you're the best." Leatherface excitedly saws through the ice, the saw shuts off, and for a moment he cannot restart it. In Leatherface's excited attempt to impress Stretch, he prematurely shorts out his saw in the ice bucket. He is neither repressed, as Clover suggests of the scene (1992, 28), nor impotent, as Cynthia Freeland assumes in her reading (2000, 249), but inexperienced, and like most adolescent boys, he runs out of gas quickly. He certainly does not "become less interested in his saw" (Clover 1992, 28), but quickly recovers and, a few minutes later, restarts it (another feature of adolescent boys). Chop-Top yells for him, and Leatherface leaves Stretch only because of this coitus interruptus. It is not just sex that appeals to Leatherface, but the material status of being sexually desirable. Thus, he waves his huge chain saw about and destroys the room in order to impress Stretch with his power. If anything, he suffers from performance anxiety, a malady quite distinct from repression.

Of the three Sawyers, Chop-Top most displays arrested development as a preadolescent boy. He finances the Sawyer meat wagon with compensation the army pays him for his injury—the source of his head plate. The dead and walking wounded of Vietnam, this grotesque, over-the-top parody reminds the viewer, fueled the military-industrial complex of the last years of the Cold War. Chop-Top sadistically tortures Stretch. He cuts her over and over with his razor, wanting to cause pain rather than just kill her. He then makes her watch him as he slices his own neck: "Look at my face! . . . It's like death eatin' a cracker, isn't it?" He is less a representative than a casualty of the patriarchal order. He is a return not of repressed sexuality but unexpressed rage. He is the revenant of a Vietnam generation whose youth was cut short and whose trauma was repressed in the feel-good Reagan years. The film offers a blunt metaphor when Lefty, pursuing the Sawyers in their amusement park, kicks a mural of Ronald Reagan's face, and the guts and gore of their previous victims burst forth in a steaming pile of viscera.

The capitalist Cook has no interest in Stretch whatsoever except as a potential disruption to his business: "Who's this? Are you the saboteur that's fucking up our house? Trying to put me out of business? Thousands of dollars lost! You got that kind of money?" His only recognition of Stretch's sexuality is in the

context of berating Leatherface for losing focus on his work: "Sex? You want to know about it? Ask me! It's a swindle, that's all. Don't get mixed up in it. . . . You got one choice, boy: sex or the saw. Sex is, well, nobody knows. But the saw is family!" To the Cook, the saw, that phallic instrument of violence, is economic, not sexual. The Cook is focused on the success of the family business. The family unit is an economic unit, and therefore its entire value for him is economic. Sex itself is economic, judging by his designation of it as a "swindle." This social stance of isolation and greedy upward mobility characterized the Reagan era and channeled patriarchal violence away from solely sexual contexts and into the free market. The Cook desires fame and money; in his introductory scene, he receives the first-place trophy in the Texas Chili Cook Off, and throughout he cares only about how much money there is to be made off of his meat.

Stretch's interaction with the male characters presents her as stronger, more resourceful, and more mentally stable than any of the "good guy" male characters. She remains single by choice, gently refusing her radio engineer L. G. McPeter's requests for dates and reminding him in no uncertain terms *not* to call her "darlin'." L.G. is a spitting, belching, Texas cliché, and if his last name is not enough to indicate his representational purpose as a patriarchal caricature, his demise should be. Left for dead in the butchering room of the Sawyers' hideout, L.G. offers Stretch his cowboy hat and, literally, the skin from his face in order for her to disguise herself and maybe escape. Stretch, though appreciative of the symbolic gesture, discards the skin and the hat. She does not need a cowboy to save her.

Discussing *Chainsaw 2*, Clover writes, "There is no male agency; the figure so designated, the Texas Ranger, proves so utterly ineffectual that he cannot save himself, much less the girl" (1992, 38). Lefty is ineffectual, but perhaps not in the sense that Clover means. Lefty is not interested in saving himself or the girl; his mission—"Bring it all down! Bring it all down to hell!"—includes self-destruction. Lefty has a psychotic death wish, and he uses Stretch as bait, a means to his end. If Lefty represents male agency, it is of a kind that only confirms what Stretch already suspected: he is nuts. This cowboy is not the iconic John Wayne, but the unhinged Dennis Hopper. Hopper's casting in *Chainsaw 2* is often noted for coinciding with his other film of 1986, David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. But more important to *Chainsaw 2*'s themes is the fact that Hopper's early years in Hollywood westerns often featured him as a sniveling, weak, cowardly cowboy villain. In addition, his meta-casting in the new context of his persona as a New Hollywood bad boy enhances his ridiculous Texas Ranger getup, complete with oversized cowboy hat, mini-chain-saws as sidearms, and an extra-long chain saw that he wields like some kind of comical Excalibur.

Stretch's confrontations with the individual Sawyers indicate in the film a

fundamental shift in the notion of family in the 1980s. Horror of the 1960s and 1970s was, as Vivian Sobchack observes, “marked by the related disintegration and transfiguration of the American bourgeois family . . . characterized, as Robin Wood so frequently points out, by its cellular construction and institutionalization of capitalist and patriarchal relations and values (among them, monogamy, heterosexuality, and consumerism) and by its present state of disequilibrium and crisis” (1996, 144). The American family of *Chainsaw 2* is entirely of a new era. The Sawyers reify patriarchal values in their consumerism and for consumer amusement. The family has disintegrated, and ironically, the disintegration of its previous patriarchal structures allows Stretch’s individuation as a woman. This is not to say that the new consumer-centric ethos is equitable along gender lines. But Stretch participates in this new ethos, hoping to use the Sawyers’ murders for professional gain. Sexualized violence manifests in profoundly different ways. Late in the film, when Leatherface catches Stretch in the amusement park and brandishes his saw, she responds with the rhetoric of an equal: “Okay, what, are you pissed off? Well, what about me? Listen, this is not going to work out! I’m trying to be open with you, it’s nobody’s fault, I just can’t do this.” Stretch defuses sexual aggression not just by appropriating the killer’s violence, but also by talking as if she is breaking up with him.

At the end of the film, Chop-Top pursues Stretch into a huge phallic monument where the Sawyers keep their grandmother’s mummified corpse. Stretch rips a chain saw out of Mrs. Sawyer’s hands, slices Chop-Top’s stomach, brandishes the saw, and does a victory dance as the camera pulls away to its final shot, of Stretch inside the monument, a Texas flag emerging from its tip. Freeland notes, “One final macabre twist is that . . . we learn that the cannibal family has a *matriarch*, albeit one who is dead. She is kept stuffed or mummified atop the battleground’s fake mountain with a chain saw ceremoniously laid in her arms like a weird baby” (2000, 251–252; emphasis in the original). The connection between Stretch and the Sawyer matriarch implies that they are productive agents that can wield violence, produce violence, and resist violence. Yet the two represent different feminine roles in different social contexts. Mrs. Sawyer is, presumably, of the Depression era, and her grandsons are baby boomers. She castrates not with a *vagina dentata*, but a *phallus chainsawus*. Her boys wreak entrepreneurial havoc in society at large. Mrs. Sawyer has no agency of her own, only through her boys. On the other hand, Stretch is a liberated woman with a career, single by choice and upwardly mobile (and just as cynical in her choices as a correlating character, Melanie Griffith’s Tess McGill in *Working Girl* [Mike Nichols, 1988]).

"ISN'T IT AMAZING WHAT THEY'RE DOING WITH PLASTIC?"

Spontaneous Combustion, Hooper's first feature after *Chainsaw 2* and the end of his Cannon deal, and his first feature to go direct to video, shifted focus from the rampant materialism of the Me generation to the ludicrous, amplified horrors of the military-industrial complex of the Reagan era, and its destructive effects on the (literally) nuclear family. Ironically set to the Ink Spots' "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire," the film opens with a prologue detailing military scientists ostensibly testing a new type of bunker to enable families to survive nuclear war. A promotional video advertises the bunkers as the next big thing that suburban families need to have. In fact, the experiment tests not the bunker but a new antiradiation drug injected directly into the bloodstream.

Test subjects Brian and Peggy come out of the bunker seemingly healthy, and pregnant. The baby, a boy, is born on August 6, and one of the scientists remarks that the birth coincides with the tenth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. Brian, Peggy, and baby David are, literally, the first nuclear family. Brian shows Peggy a toy merry-go-round he has gotten for their son, and wonders, earnestly, "Isn't it amazing what they're doing with plastic?" This banal question and the merry-go-round figure in the central themes of the film.

Tragedy strikes almost immediately—in the hospital right after David's birth, when both Brian and Peggy burst into flames and burn to death. David is given over to the supervision of Lou Orlander, the corporate executive who heads the project; he has the baby renamed "Sam" and raised by surrogates. As an adult, Sam is a high-strung, nervous high school teacher in a tentative relationship with a fellow teacher named Lisa. He runs a constant fever and, in keeping with Hooper's focus on men whose agency is tied to invisible, oppressive patriarchal structures, seems consumed both by personal stress and by the feeling that things are happening all around him that he cannot control. He prepares to celebrate his birthday, which coincides with the opening of a new nuclear plant nearby. In the background, his students wear "No Nukes" arm-bands and organize protests.

The milquetoast Sam is yet another of Hooper's cuckolds. He has a tense lunch with his ex-wife, who left him for an older man, Dr. Marsh, who happens to be the therapist each sees. Marsh joins the coterie of professionals and acquaintances constantly checking in on Sam, all speaking in patronizing tones, which only adds to his mounting anger and confusion. At peak moments, when his anger crests, Sam bursts flames from his body or unintentionally causes others to burst into flame. Gradually, Sam discovers that he has been surveilled for his entire life—a military-industrial-complex version of *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998)—and that both Marsh and his former father-in-law, none

other than Lou Orlander, have been monitoring him to gauge whether his penchant for spontaneous combustion can be weaponized and monetized.

Like the plastic merry-go-round, Sam is a bauble, a toy for the scientists to observe and manipulate. Plastic, of course, is malleable under heat, and can be molded into whatever shape is desired. Molding Sam seems to be the aim of the shadowy cabal that has been observing him throughout his life. Sam seems to be in a continual state of tense befuddlement, constantly asking anyone in earshot just what is going on. He gets pushed around, and around. He has no sense of security, control, or agency. As he burns from the inside, his eruptions destroy all those around him. He is an angry beta male who has been denied a place and purpose in the world. Exacerbating his sense of being alone, despite being constantly surrounded, he learns that even Lisa has been brought into Sam's life by Orlander to keep an eye on him.

Stylistically, *Spontaneous Combustion* includes several montages that recall the avant-garde sequences from *Peter, Paul and Mary: The Song Is Love*. A climactic fever-dream sequence merges shots of flames, images of Sam's parents, and red electro-distortion. It is a telling resonance, even if unintended, for the sequences from the earlier documentary to convey in part the pressures and disorienting social transitions accompanying the Vietnam War protests, along with the unraveling of the counterculture. Sam's combustibility links to that of Chop-Top, the traumatized veteran who cuts himself. He is so pressurized that he cannot contain his emotions.

In the film's concluding sequence, both Sam and Lisa ignite. (It turns out that Lisa too has been an experiment and has similar [dis]abilities.) Before they both immolate, Sam absorbs Lisa's fire into himself. He atomizes, leaving her apparently safe and unharmed. Sam dies as he lived, alone. And in doing so, he suggests an implicit acknowledgment of the degenerative effects of a masculine toxicity—here, literal, as well—linked particularly with America's exceptionalist, expansionist, imperialist practices.

"I'M NOT AN IDIOT!"

The not-so-quiet desperation of insecure men seeking to control their own destinies—and to hell with whoever gets stepped on in the process—continued to feature in Hooper's television work, even though he had less input on the scripts. Soon after the release of *Spontaneous Combustion*, Hooper directed an episode for the third season of HBO's *Tales from the Crypt*, which aired July 3, 1991. "Dead Wait" is a noirish short set on an island plantation, adapted from a 1952 issue of the EC Comics series *The Vault of Horror*. Tumult spreads on an unnamed island, modeled on Haiti, as rebel forces threaten to overwhelm the

military and sweep through the white-owned plantations. Against this sweltering tropical backdrop, another obsolescent man, a carrot-topped jewel thief named "Red" Buckley, plots to steal a rare black pearl.

The opening shot frames Red sitting in bed under a mosquito net, poring over a book of chess gambits. His partner, Charlie, arrives and reveals that he has tracked the black pearl to a plantation belonging to a man named Duval. Charlie, who is dismissive of Red, curses him as stupid when he tries to share an idea to alter their plan. "Don't treat me like a fuckin' moron," warns Red. Charlie scoffs, sweeping the pieces off Red's chessboard. Red snaps and shoots Charlie, snarling, "Chess isn't just a game! It's a way to improve your mind! If you're so fucking smart, how come you're the one that's dead?" Red is indeed a hothead, with delusions of intellectualism and a keen sensitivity to any insults about his intelligence. The episode is lit in noir style, with light sources broken by slats to bisect objects with shadows, and medium close-ups that emphasize the sweat on the actors' faces and bodies. The style conveys Red's tension, the pressure he feels to "win" and prove himself. He is oblivious of the real war around him, but his violence and opportunism come from the same fundamental impulses.

Red meets Duval in a bar and petitions him for a job. Duval's mistress, Kathrine, compliments Red on his hair, which is unique on the island. Duval hires him, in part because Red says that he plays chess. At the plantation, Duval has a chessboard set up in the background. Though we never see the two play, we assume that they have a running match. Peligre, a voodoo priestess employed by Duval, also remarks on Red's hair: "Our culture believes that the color red symbolizes life, so you should feel very blessed." On the contrary, Red's self-consciousness about his intelligence extends to his hair. He constantly shifts awkwardly from one foot to the other, running his hand through his hair when people remark on it.

Almost immediately Kathrine seduces Red (making Duval yet another of Hooper's cuckolds), but Red convinces himself that he was the seducer. "Red king takes black queen," he murmurs smugly, knocking over a chess piece. The femme fatale Kathrine and the voodoo priestess Peligre deepen the central theme of Red's insecurity, which underlies his shaky bravado and, in turn, his utter ignorance and naïveté. His plan to steal the pearl is clumsy; he quickly loses patience and pressures Kathrine to find the combination to Duval's security system. "I don't have time for subtle," he insists.

Peligre warns Red about Kathrine in order, she claims, to protect him. Red kills Duval, but cannot find the pearl. "I'm not an idiot, Duval," Red insists. Realizing Duval has swallowed the pearl, Red cuts the stone from his stomach.⁷ Kathrine double-crosses him and holds him at gunpoint. Peligre appears, kills Kathrine by pinning a voodoo doll made in Kathrine's image, and offers to help

Red escape. Finally, Peligre reveals that far from being a “red king,” Red hasn’t even been playing the right game. We see why Peligre wanted to preserve Red from Kathrine when Peligre severs his head and returns to her village, which will prize his exotic red hair. Kathrine, like Stretch, tried to play the game, but lost. Peligre, on the other hand, doesn’t play chess. She just waits out the colonialist thieves and decapitates the red king.

The short, straightforward episode hinges on typical features of Hooper’s men. Duval is an imperialist whose time has passed. As the revolution rages on the island, he seems unconcerned, perhaps accepting that he is rotting from the inside and isn’t long for this world anyway. Red obsesses over status—as he says, “This pearl means respect!”—and he is desperate to obtain the pearl and buy the life he thinks he deserves. His inability to look beyond the orderly grid of the “chessboard” that he thinks is the key to intellectual and strategic superiority blinds him to the fact that he, a stranger out of place, has no idea what is really going on. Red’s intellectual insecurities and violent impulses, tied as they are to classically colonial interests, lead inexorably to disaster.

“IF THINE EYE OFFEND THEE, PLUCK IT OUT, AND CAST IT FROM THEE”

Male insecurity remains the primary theme in Hooper’s next project, “Eye,” a segment of the triptych *Body Bags*, codirected by John Carpenter and produced by Sandy King for the Showtime network and released in 1993. Carpenter and King envisioned an anthology that would achieve a *douche écossaise*, or hot-to-cold roller-coaster effect, of “something pop culture, something oddball, and then something stark and horrifying,” as King put it (Sandy King 2013). Hooper was tasked with the “stark and horrifying” part.

Hooper’s film is a short chronicle of fettered expectations and mounting resentment. Brent Matthews is a promising minor league baseball player, primed for a call-up to the majors. On a rainy night, he has a car accident that gouges out one of his eyes, derailing his baseball career. Doctors suggest an experimental eye transplant.⁸ After the transplant, Brent begins seeing images of bodies buried in his backyard and has visions of committing violent acts. He lashes out at Cathy, his wife. Eventually, he discovers that the transplanted eye belonged to a murderer who had been abused as a child, and that the murderer’s psyche was taking over Brent’s body. Just as Brent succumbs and attempts to murder Cathy, he momentarily regains control and stabs himself in the eye.

Again, as with “Dead Wait,” the simple narrative of “Eye” returns to Hooper’s themes. Brent recuperates in his suburban home. He has to stay put while his wife takes over breadwinning duties. Further, Cathy is pregnant, though the

couple—who spout Bible verses—seem rather chaste. She gives Brent the big news by leading him to a large wrapped present, which turns out to be a crib he will need to assemble. That night, Cathy somewhat reluctantly agrees to sex, but then interrupts to insist that he close the shutters. Brent already feels constrained and powerless, and eventually he gives up, citing a “headache.”

As Brent’s new violent and sexual urges begin to stir, he turns to Bible reading to cope, to rein them in. But are they in fact new, or is he realizing frustrations he has already had? Hooper makes a point of framing Brent behind bars, as if caged, through the windows of his house, the rails of a staircase, and the bars of the crib he clumsily tries to put together. Brent is bored and despondent. He dreamed of being a baseball star, but now he is trapped in a suburban box, puttering around in the yard, feeling worthless. The impulses derived from his new eye, his new sight, as a priest’s reading of Acts 9:17 ironically emphasizes, not only flash visions of the murderer’s past but cast new light on Brent’s present circumstances.⁹ He simultaneously desires domesticity and stardom, faith and fucking. The competing impulses drive him mad.

Cathy wears buttoned-up dresses that cover her body ankle to neck, and demurs at Brent’s every attempt at flirtation. Overcome with lust, Brent finally takes her, and Cathy lies rigid, her hand clutching a Bible. She finally fights him off after he bites her. He begins to reject the bounds of domesticity, shouting at her to leave him alone. In a parody of suburban yard work, he begins measuring, digging, and marking boxlike grids. Brent’s final attack on Cathy is again framed through bars and shutters, locking the two in their suburban hell.

Cathy reminds Brent of his identity, of his responsibilities, by pointing to his name written in a Bible she gave him years ago. Taken aback, he stabs his new eye and dies, as blood drips onto another verse, Matthew 5:29, “And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee.” Like Steve Freeling or George Gardner, the helpless fathers of *Poltergeist* and *Invaders from Mars*, Brent chafes against his prescribed roles, which render him powerless. And like Dr. Matteson in *Night Terrors* (1993), he turns to religion to subdue his sexual urges, only to avert them elsewhere, to his ultimate doom.

“DIE FOR OIL, SUCKER!”

“The Damned Thing” in a way bookends “Eye.” Here, rather than a suburban father-to-be constrained by his future, the story examines a separated, alcoholic father, constrained by his past. Whereas Brent Matthews is tortured by his averted desires, Sheriff Kevin Reddle is tortured by his failure to live up to expectations. “The Damned Thing” was the second episode Hooper directed for Showtime’s *Masters of Horror* series, and like his first episode, “Dance of the

Dead,” the teleplay was written by R. C. Matheson (son of Richard), very loosely inspired by Ambrose Bierce’s 1893 short story of the same name.

The episode opens in a rural Texas community with a couple and their son at dinner. Suddenly stricken and muttering, “the damned thing,” the man shoots his wife and pursues his son. Just as he is about to murder the boy, an unseen force eviscerates him. Flash-forward twenty-five years: the son is Sheriff Reddle, a paranoid alcoholic with security cameras surrounding his home. The cameras act as a sort of surrogate, dominant father figure guarding the property. Reddle lives in fear that he will be what his father became, even as his paranoia renders him a domineering control freak. His wife has left him, taking their boy, though they gamely try to maintain a cordial relationship.

Gradually a strange, seemingly contagious mania grips the town. Tempers flare randomly among the townsfolk, and several violently kill themselves or attack others. The local priest, who had cast about for sinners to whom he could offer penance and absolution, begins murdering them instead. Reddle realizes “the damned thing” has returned, and tries ineffectually to save his family. In an atavistic turn, he resorts to drink and succumbs to the same madness that gripped his father. He kills the priest, another failed, would-be “father” figure whose vain (in both senses of the word) attempts to minister to his flock provide much of the episode’s comic relief. Reddle moves on to his wife and son, but before he can kill them, the thing manifests as a giant entity made of oil and consumes Reddle. His wife and son flee in their car, but run out of gas, and the creature catches them.

The Bierce source story featured an invisible creature that drove a hunter nearly mad. Hooper and Matheson expand the political and environmental potential of the story with a creature that affects entire towns on a cycle, every twenty-five years, or once a generation. They specifically wanted to draw connections between an extractive industry like the oil business to what Matheson calls the “hypocrisy” of small-town civility. As Matheson explains on the DVD commentary track of “The Damned Thing”: “Because it was Texas, and I was thinking a lot about Al Gore, and about how we have taken the planet and so stripped it and stolen from it, and that in so doing there are repercussions far more dramatic and perhaps fatal than we ever considered. . . . Oil has played such an important role in both the formation and the decline and rupturing of cultures, and has caused so much bloodshed” (Matheson 2006). The town is trapped in an economic system that sucks out everything of material value and leaves behind a broken, abused community that has little to sustain it; instead, it goes through the motions and clings to the past. The small town itself becomes part of the cycle of abuse.

In this context, Reddle is as shell-shocked as Ben in *Salem’s Lot* or, perhaps



Figure 10.3. Hooper's anxious men, *top to bottom*: Red (James Remar), in over his head in the *Tales from the Crypt* episode "Dead Wait" (HBO, 1991); Brent (Mark Hamill), "caged" and infantilized in the *Body Bags* segment "Eye" (Showtime Networks, 1993); and Reddle (Sean Patrick Flanery), ineffectual and useless, no matter what he tries to do, in the *Masters of Horror* episode "The Damned Thing" (Showtime Networks, 2006).

more apropos, Judd in *Eaten Alive*. Whereas Judd turns to a twisted form of religion to channel his violence, Reddle turns to the bottle. Nothing Reddle can do will save his town, his family, or himself from the madness. Throughout the narrative, Reddle tries to maintain order, to research the cause of the madness—newspaper clippings divulge that a mysterious force moves from town to town as the oil wells dry up—but to no avail. (Religion seems to dry up as well.) Reddle desperately strains to fulfill his role, but ultimately rages against his family, his neighbors, and the nullified dreams of his own life.

The parallels between environmental devastation and a dark, repressed past are timely.¹⁰ Every few decades, a new crisis emerges, new wars are fought, and more people—more men—die, for oil. Hooper is no Luddite, and no filmmaker (or author) would want to see the lights go out. But Hooper does seem concerned with stewardship and sustainability. Sheriff Reddle's inability to take care of his family and his town in the face of the environmental and social ruin wrought by the oil monster points to such questions. What possible end can there be in the face of unrestrained greed? As the newspaper editor Gabe Green warns Reddle, "The final stage of denial is self-destruction."

"SEX OR THE SAW, BOY, WHAT'S IT GONNA BE?"

The American twilight is necessarily a twilight of white men, the men to whom the American Dream was first promised. Indeed study after study charts the decline of white male cultural hegemony and working- and middle-class stability. (Wealthy white men, of course, remain where they are, for now.) "And it's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations," as then-senator Barack Obama put it in 2008. Hooper's men have traced this twilight. *Eggshells* is an America in tumult, with National Guardsmen, protesters, and hippie dropouts coexisting but segregated into antagonistic tribes. By the time of *Texas Chain Saw*, *Eaten Alive*, and *Salem's Lot*, Hooper was sketching an economic and cultural segregation that concentrated and isolated its characters, leading to violent results, and he examined these characters over and over in later contexts. The men that inhabit Hooper's cinema are culturally insulated and isolated, resentful and sensitive to insult. They feel that they have been left behind or pushed aside and that they have no outlet for their grievances. Those of them who do have a "place" in society are weak and ineffectual, subsisting on blustering delusions or succumbing to smoldering meekness.

Sex or the saw is ultimately an illusory choice of control. Sex puts your destiny in the (ahem) hands of another, while the saw cuts to please you. As we

think about the overflowing bile in contemporary America, the public rise of fringe groups like the Proud Boys, “meninists,” and larger contingents grouped under the term “alt-right” we can see that what they have in common is the source of their anger. They feel sexually, socially, and economically dispossessed and denied. The NASCAR fan’s plaintive “It used to be a hell of a good country, at one time. I just don’t know what happened” seems to be the central point of bewilderment for them. Sex is a swindle, there is no place for the little guy, but the saw is family, and for Hooper, this twisted family of prescribed roles and impossible outcomes is horror, like death eating a cracker.

Hooper’s novel *Midnight Movie* (2011) features perhaps the ultimate manifestation of such men. In exploring the burgeoning online troll culture, Hooper and his cowriter, Alan Goldsher, anticipate a “community” that would come to be known as incels—“involuntary celibates”—who agitate for violence and express entitled resentment at “successful” men and desirable women.¹¹ These are Internet trolls as monsters, as terrorists. The novel’s simultaneously goofy and sinister film geek Dude McGee weaponizes incel rage by unleashing “The Game,” a viral spread of zombieism, violence, and sexual violence that grips the nation for a few months before it suddenly, inexplicably stops. The “end” of The Game brings no resolution. Those guys are still out there.

They are still out there and are now far more visible. The 2016 election yoked both disgruntled white working- and middle-class men—and 53 percent of white women—and the more sinister “white nationalists” with the interests of the corporate class. President Donald Trump’s rhetoric echoes not just that of “right America feeling wronged” but also of long-building resentments and anxieties, economic and existential. Significantly, Hooper never populated his films with many people of color. His consistent focus was on toxic white masculinities and the horrors that can erupt from their anxiety and rage. It is perhaps fitting, then, that his final film, *Djinn* (2013), was his first to feature main characters of color. The film, set in the United Arab Emirates, concerns Khalid and Salama, a young Emirati couple who leave their home in the United States to visit their birth country. They move into a high-rise apartment complex,¹² where they uncover Khalid’s dark heritage. Perhaps *Djinn* indicates not just America in twilight, but humanity in general.

NOTES

1. The term dates to self-help men’s movements of the 1980s, which often claimed to help men recapture traditional aspects of masculinity that had been diluted in modern, urban society.

2. The director is the daughter of the current Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), which added a wrinkle to the production. Alexandra Pelosi insisted her aim

was to listen to disaffected working- and middle-class (almost exclusively white) conservative voters, yet some media pundits accused her of “Hollywood elitism.” She did not include interviews with wealthy conservatives.

3. For a comprehensive study, see the work by Michael Kimmel (2013).

4. I appreciate the clever pun in Dominic’s title, “Old, Gifted and Back: Peter, Paul and Mary Throw Out Lifelines to Another Generation,” a play on Nina Simone’s civil rights anthem “To Be Young, Gifted and Black,” even as I marvel at the irony of it, given that Arizona recognized Martin Luther King Jr. Day as a paid holiday only in 1992, after several years of controversy. In my view, the title is an oblivious disregard of both the legacy of the song and Peter, Paul and Mary’s real work as allies of the civil rights movement.

5. Lefty, it is later revealed, is the uncle of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*’s Sally and Franklin.

6. Not incidentally, the promotional poster for *Chainsaw 2* arranges the Sawyer family in a parody of the characters in *The Breakfast Club*.

7. In a truly disgusting special-effects sequence, Duval, who was revealed earlier to suffer from schistosomiasis (infestation with parasitic worms), bursts open, full of maggots and worms, and Red must dig through them to find the pearl.

8. The doctors are played by the veteran sci-fi actor John Agar and the B-movie king Roger Corman.

9. “And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost” (King James Version).

10. And it is a further indication that Hooper’s critical sensibility squares with the American Gothic as a school of suspicion, linking repressed histories to the land itself, which bubbles and seethes with symptomatic injury. Hooper’s environmental Gothic runs from *Texas Chain Saw* to *Crocodile* (2000) and beyond. *The Mangler* (1995) echoes Herman Melville’s “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” (1855) with its paper mill polluting the surrounding rivers with toxic red waste that metaphorically runs with the life force of the mill’s female workers. And in *Mortuary* (2005), made just a year before “The Damned Thing,” the landscape is infected by a cosmic force, echoing H. P. Lovecraft’s “The Colour Out of Space” (1927), but is also the diseased result of so-called American progress and expansionism.

11. The term “incel” first gained mainstream currency in the aftermath of the 2014 Isla Vista killings, perpetrated by Elliot Rodger, who posted a YouTube video in which he expressed his aim was to punish women for denying him sex, and men who were sexually active. Rodger has since become an avatar of online incel chatter.

12. Another Hooper motif.

BAD TOUCHES

Spontaneous Combustion in the Aftermath of the Nuclear Family

ALANNA THAIN

*Tobe calls Eric [Lasher, still photographer] and [me] over to ask our opinion of whether or not the character of Sam should die at the end of the film. Evidently, he's recently read an article decrying horror film clichés and wants to sound us out about what we think. He's quick to add that he doesn't consider *Spontaneous Combustion* to be a horror film in the traditional sense, thinking of it as more of a metaphysical thriller.*

STAN GIESEA, "CHARRED REMAINS" (2012)

IN THE DIFFICULT PERIOD BETWEEN *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986) and Tobe Hooper's independently produced feature *Spontaneous Combustion* (1990), it is easy to see Hooper grieving the short-circuiting of his career and the lost promise of a conventional trajectory of success. In his mangled, chaotic, and little seen film of nuclear trauma, the poisoned promise of the American Dream and the failures of intergenerational care channel an incandescent grief that can, in a flash, destroy a man's entire existence. In an ironic side effect of nuclear absurdity, the protagonist Sam's rage and sadness are as toxically consuming as they are destructive of the cruel world around him, and a single moment of grace merely returns things below the surface. *Spontaneous Combustion* wobbles as it negotiates the scale of the horror it explores, struggling to paint the shattered intimacies of the nuclear family at a cosmic level. The result is a profoundly messy, even embarrassing film of noncathartic "ugly feelings" (Ngai 2005) that rejects at every turn the military-industrial vision of the supposed "clean kill" of nuclear weaponry. Reading this irradiation of the military-industrial complex at the heart of the nuclear family, this essay explores the mutant ecology of the nuclear and its impossible, ugly, and American masculine grief.

JANUARY 1955, NEVADA DESERT HYDROGEN BOMB TESTING SITE

Spontaneous Combustion opens with roiling flames seen against a black void. Fire shoots across the screen, against a cheesy and uneasy synth soundtrack, underpinned by the low thrum of human screaming. The fire leaves no traces, constantly reabsorbing itself until at last a focus pull condenses the flames into a scribble of red filaments, vaguely suggesting the outline of a mutant fetus, which are finally resolved into a dangling light bulb as the setting is announced: 1955, Nevada Desert Hydrogen Bomb Testing Site. A leisurely downward pan ends with a red vinyl record dropping into play position. The laconic strands of the Ink Spots' "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire" (1941) fills the air. That song's corraling of intensity—"I just want to start a flame in your heart"—sums up the film's unruly, impossible relation to the nuclear's cosmic intimacy.

In a bunker, a young couple in army greens strap themselves into chairs as, over the intercom, disembodied voices wish them luck. Tenderly, anxiously, they attach their monitors and inject themselves as a countdown begins. Elsewhere, a sandbag-protected camera crew prepares to document a distant explosion in the predawn light; inside the control bunker, Nina, the lone female scientist amid the military men, radios Brian and Peggy to say, in the film's first instance of perversion of care: "Good luck, my children. I love you. *Gott mit Dir*." Anticipation and anxiety abound as, in the distance, the sun begins to rise. An enormous rickety bomb labeled "Samson" starts to come to life.

The relentless countdown is too much: Peggy cries out, "Brian, I'm scared" as they clasp hands. "I did it for us, baby," Brian pleads. Then, at the count of zero . . . nothing. Everyone holds in suspense as Samson trembles and smokes. Anticlimactically, with a hot white flash and a surprisingly soft rumble, the bomb explodes. From within the world of these intimate witnesses, we suddenly cut to an outer-space point of view of a vast explosion on the surface of the earth. Scale and time warp irreparably. Back in the bunker, the building cracks up around Brian and Peggy as she screams in terror. Told that they were testing the security of a fallout shelter, they never knew that the shelter was designed to fail and expose them to high doses of radiation in order to test an experimental vaccine.

In any case, it is all for show. We suddenly switch gears and find ourselves in a propaganda short, the kind that the US Army regularly distributed in cinemas in the 1950s. The film promotes Modern Atomic Technology's "Project Samson," the latest in home nuclear architecture. In black-and-white images, a dad heads off to work, briefcase in hand, through the door of a bomb shelter. A voice-over proclaims, "A new tool has been given mankind, but in the wrong hands, one of unimaginable destructive power. And that is why we must remain ever vigilant, ever prepared!" as soldiers race toward the mushroom cloud.



Figure 11.1. A happy ending for Peggy (Stacy Edwards) and Brian (Brian Bremer) in Atom City, in *Spontaneous Combustion* (Tobe Hooper, Taurus Entertainment, 1990).

Construction workers pour concrete as a peppy soundtrack plays, and the announcer says, “That’s how we build ‘em in the US of A, strong! Strong enough to protect our national heroes, Brian and Peggy Bell!” The terrified young couple from the opening is shown setting up their “home” in the bunker, Peggy in her crinoline dress and Brian’s hair neatly slicked back. Dubbed “America’s first nuclear family,” their reward is a new house in “Atom City,” Phoenix, Arizona.

The film ends, the lights come up, and everyone applauds, celebrating the successful trial and the end of isolation for Brian and Peggy. An officer giddily declares that the trailer will have a huge release, in “1,500 theaters,” from coast to coast. Hooper’s straight-to-video film could only dream of such exposure. Hooper was likely inspired by propaganda films promoting the army’s Nevada Test Site explosions, like *The Atom Soldier* (1955), which documented coerced experiments that sent troops into the fallout zone after detonation in order to test protocols for ground mobilization during nuclear war. After Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), these films can be seen only through a miasma of bitter kitsch. Still, you can’t help wincing as a commanding officer blithely lays out the mission for his soldiers, who will run straight toward the bomb. In reaction shots, young men squint uncertainly under the hot Nevada sun at the claims, neatly outlined on a blackboard, that ducking and covering for a few seconds as the blast passes should be enough to keep them safe. The blatant lies and paternalistic bluster of their commanding officer underscore the ruthlessness of a testing regime that saw everything as experimental material and shamelessly spectacularized the results at Saturday matinees. Almost everyone

is likewise familiar with images from “*Survival Town*” *Atom Test* (1955), which shows the effects of a nuclear blast on a custom-built town populated with mannequins; visuals from the short film have been repurposed in popular media for decades. In Brian and Peggy Bell, Hooper brings these mannequins to life as “America’s first nuclear family.”

At the screening party for the propaganda short, scientists, military personnel, and a mysterious cigarette-smoking man (Lew Orlander, the chairman of Modern Atomic Technology) mingle and plot. When Peggy is found to be “unexpectedly” pregnant, an outcome later revealed as a setup bought and paid for by Lew, consternation turns to opportunity. When baby David is born, on the tenth anniversary of the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, the only thing amiss is his constant hyperthermia of 100 degrees and a “perfect” circular birthmark on his hand. His parents are over the moon. But as a nurse plucks him from his mother’s arms to return to the nursery, Peggy waves good-bye and her hand catches fire. Brian too bursts into flame; he leaps to her rescue, but they both burn to a crisp, with barely a singe on their surroundings.

The entire hospital bed and the hideous corpses are transported wholesale from the hospital back to the military base, a visual marker of the film’s critique of institutional callousness. As the cause of death is hotly debated, the question arises: can it be reproduced? In walks a mysterious foreign expert, Dr. Vandermeer, a “character patterned at least in part after Dutch expatriate physicist Niels Bohr, one of the architects of the Manhattan Project,” and played by the director André De Toth (Giese 2012, 43; in fact, Bohr was Danish, not Dutch).¹ In a thick Germanic accent, he pronounces, “The bodies burned from inside with fury, and the sound, the sound like angels’ scream!” His verdict: spontaneous human combustion, a natural though rare phenomenon unleashed by a fatal combination of the experimental vaccine and exposure to radiation. He approaches the corpses and, poking around the burnt flesh, cracks open the charred head of Brian and extracts a shrunken skull.

A cross-fade from the crying baby to a close-up of a birthmark on an adult man’s hand brings us into the final day in the life of David Bell, now known as Sam (Brad Dourif). He paces a stage in a high school gym, reciting King Lear’s condemnation of his daughter, badly, again staging the failure of the familial. The opening signals the dreadful paradoxes of nuclear horror: the simultaneity of the spectacular and the invisible, the myth of clean violence, and the radical suspension of normative coordinates of time and space. All this is in relation to an unseemly grief and the dreadful failure of the nuclear family to protect itself. Its intergenerational trauma is a monstrosity that, like the “clean kill” of the nuclear, is both radically condensed and unpredictably consuming. The paradox of the nuclear family is a paradox of scale, giving the lie to the myth of the

“unit” that privatizes, circumscribes, and measures family love in the context of the modern nation-state. The film plays out across a wild grief for something that never existed, part of the nuclear’s radical rewritings of cause and effect.

ROTTEN AT THE CORE

Though the concept of the nuclear family predates the advent of the nuclear bomb, the American domestication of the nuclear through intensive testing, largely in the Southwest, coincided with a cultural moment when “a kind of cult formed around (the nuclear) family” at the heart of the American Dream (D. Brooks 2020). Even as fallout sowed contamination that would linger beyond the conceivable lifespan of the human species, it likewise ushered in an intimacy with the “future” at the cellular level, one quickly converted into profit and production. At the edge of the experimental test zone seen in the opening of *Spontaneous Combustion*, Las Vegas was one of the first places in the world to capitalize on the spectacle of the nuclear. Close enough to the Nevada Test Site that guests could watch the explosions poolside, from the comfort of their rooms, or at “Dawn Bomb parties” where they quaffed themed cocktails until the bomb turned night to day, Vegas turned the rhythm of apocalypse into a mad management of risk (Bliss 2014). Paul Preciado has traced the 1950s nuclear spectacle of the female body in the public sphere, including Miss Atomic Bomb contests and the development of the bikini as a technology for regulating public nudity in the aftermath of the Bikini Atoll tests (2014, 68–76). What matters is not so much what is shown as the pharmacopornographic regulation of sexuality in public spaces, the fiction of private domesticity and the intimate body. Preciado reminds us of Beatriz Colomina’s work in tracing how “the protection of the domestic home as bulwark against the dangers of the atomic edge translated into the boom of the underground fallout shelters,” which make invisible and privatize women’s sexuality (74).

In *Spontaneous Combustion*, Peggy’s susceptibility to lovemaking in the adrenaline rush of surviving the bomb is a subject for prurient speculation by her husband and her boss—between men—and preprogrammed. Her reward, a suburban home, is also a prophylaxis against atomic danger. Later, however, it is the repulsive overexposure of Sam’s body, its somatic excesses of grief and anger manifesting as radioactive eruptions that he vainly tries to hide with scraps of his clothing, that can’t cover up what, in the wake of the sexual revolution and divorce in the 1980s, needs to be regulated, privatized through corporate control and the management of love and desire. Sam is continually cuckolded in the film, but his masculinity also has a mean streak that the film is not afraid to show.

According to Joseph Masco, “With the first nuclear explosion on July 16, 1945, Americans entered a post nuclear environment of their own invention. From this perspective, the nuclear apocalypse is not in the future—a thing to be endlessly deterred through nuclear weapons and international relations—it is already here, being played out in the unpredictable movement of radioactive materials moving through bodies and biosphere” (2020, 294). As a result, “the experimental projects that produced and now maintain the bomb have collectively turned the entire biosphere into an experimental zone—one in which we all live—producing new mutations . . . in both natural and social orders” (315). Such changes can’t be contained in a single, monstrous body. While 1950s horror films such as *Them!* (Gordon Douglas, 1954) attempted to visualize such nuclear ecologies through outsized mutant ants (294), Hooper situates monstrosity in the imbrications of the mediatic and the somatic. Their shared message is the scrambled transmissions of nuclear grief. One of the signature effects of the bomb is its disruptions of rhythms of the everyday. The nuclear has produced such a rupture with the past that its markers are a serious contender as a place to pinpoint the start of the Anthropocene. At the same time, the half-life of radioactive decay, particularly of plutonium, has colonized the future of the human race.

The nuclear converts the stability of the quotidian into a practice of

partial knowledge, making the challenge of the nuclear age as much the regulation of uncertainty as the documentation of biological effects. This uncertainty is intensified by the specific attributes of radiation-induced illness, which includes a displacement in time (sometimes occurring decades after exposure) and a potential to be genetically transferred across generations. Recognizing the subtle but totalizing scope of the nuclear transformation of nature . . . challenges the traditional concept of a “nuclear test” . . . For how does one define or limit the scope of the nuclear laboratory when its trace elements can be found literally everywhere on the planet? (Masco 2020, 300)

Many have written of the deranging temporal effects of the nuclear imaginary, its harrowing half-life shearing the body’s stability through an image of photographic flash and decay, and simultaneously destabilizing our relation to the ecological and the human measure of time. Nuclear garbage, which will outlive the species that generated it, is like a tragic graffiti to mark loss: “We were here.” Hooper works this same scarred dystopia of American promise in his films, where the land reaches up and through characters twisted into corporeal vortexes of violence and cruelty. He explores the way that time out of

joint overwrites the present in the visceral graffiti of what has been and what will be lost.

Spontaneous Combustion sits within the troubled failure of America to shore up its most basic myths, a failure that relies on a reach for the paranormal via the nuclear. It was made after a difficult stretch in Hooper's career. *Poltergeist's* (1982) success failed to translate into opportunities for Hooper, its box-office popularity tainted by rumors that Hooper was merely a glove for Steven Spielberg's guiding hand. Hooper's three-picture deal with Cannon Films produced a series of critical and box-office flops. *Spontaneous Combustion* saw Hooper turn to independent productions to get work, but it went straight to video and has largely languished, seen mainly by Hooper completists only. The film is indeed an embarrassment, with gaping plot holes that are likely the result of Hooper's loss of final cut and a brutally short production schedule.

The film is particularly embarrassing in its presentation of Sam's histrionic, incandescent grief. When the film moves to the present day after Peggy and Brian are immolated, the first thing we see is Sam as a self-consciously bad actor, his students rolling their eyes at his hammy performance. Brad Dourif, a marvelous and singular actor, is deeply compelling as Sam, a man who learns and loses everything about his past in a single day. He alternates between a tender marveling at this discovery and an increasingly violent rage that hurts him as much as anyone else: he helplessly burns alongside his "victims." His grief cuts through every form of paternalistic control: his doctor, who now dates his ex-wife; the cops that try to arrest him; and his ultimate "bad dad," Lew Orlander: father of Sam's ex, architect of his birth and subsequent life down to his love affair with Lisa, and Dr. Frankenstein to Sam's final, monstrous form. Sam's very masculinity is at stake here: he fails completely at playing the good soldier, and his histrionics become hysterics.

This unwieldy film has nonetheless acquired passionate defenders, such as Kiyoshi Kurosawa, who cites it as an inspiration for his techno-thriller *Pulse* (2001). He sees Hooper's film as an "impossible romance" in a world saturated by nuclear testing (Kurosawa 2008). In *Pulse*, which explores a liminal zone where the dead linger when the afterlife is full, and where new technologies have created indeterminate spaces, Kurosawa borrows the visual language of both the nuclear and spontaneous human combustion, in the form of greasy black stains that are the only remains of disappeared humans, atmospheric markers of the post-Internet world. His too is a world of mutant ecology.

On the eve of the relaunching of a nuclear generator in his hometown, Sam suddenly finds himself unknowingly able to bring fiery death to any who cross him, even as he starts to flickeringly self-destruct. When the news announces the mysterious death by fire of Amy Whittaker, a prominent advocate for nuclear

power, Sam remarks that he had a huge fight with her the night before—he was “so mad [he] could have killed her”—just moments before he suddenly sparks into flame. While the film’s ending returns Sam to the legacy of monstrous offspring, in a confrontation with Orlander, part of what makes the film such a mixed bag is that it never settles into the flow of a singular horror structure. If Hooper felt that *Spontaneous Combustion* was less “a horror film in the traditional sense” than a “metaphysical thriller,” the reason is likely because of the way that the monstrous is bound to the unwieldy cut of nuclear mutation and its unlivable grief.

NO HOME MOVIE

Sam never knew his parents and was raised an orphan. But when his world starts to crack open after Whittaker’s fiery death, he regains access to the intergenerational trauma of nuclear grief. While Sam drives home, he listens to a radio psychic attempt to contact Whittaker, diagnosing her death as SHC (spontaneous human combustion), “the fire from heaven,” here delicately balanced between the marvelous and the mundane. *Fire from Heaven: A Study of Spontaneous Combustion in Human Beings* (1976), by Michael Harrison, is a sprawling meander through SHC that Hooper read in preparation for the film. Harrison loquaciously weaves tenuous connections between phenomena as varied as the ancient Egyptian notion of *ka*, tipsy landladies, and cattle mutilations in order to solve the mystery of SHC.² The event’s general characteristic is the intense, utterly consumptive burning of a human being, leading to absolute destruction that barely registers on the material surroundings (clothing, furniture, walls), with no known initiating cause. Most people first encounter SHC through uncanny photos of, say, a human shin and beslippered foot on a black blotchy stain, the grim remains of a victim.

Harrison occasionally links SHC with the nuclear, particularly around the phenomena of the body’s energetic field and the invisible yet effective force of radioactivity. Hooper appropriates these links, though the film fails to synthesize them into a coherent story. What persists is the intense violence of SHC’s isolation. Hooper animates its selective immolation through the images of flames jetting out of Sam’s arm without his surroundings catching on fire. The horror of this image—of a controlled and isolated flame that becomes progressively more destructive and that leaves Sam more alone than ever—becomes a metaphor for his terrible isolation from his own past. Sam is a mutant offspring not so much of his parents and their status as test subjects, but of the violent underside of American exceptionalism. As he grows into his inheritance—pyrokinesis—his deadly ability manifests whenever he experiences anger and,

above all, grief. In an inversion of lineage, Sam loses the name his parents gave him—David—in favor of Sam, the offspring of the bomb Samson, anachronistically conflating the familial and the military. The film is a spectacle of impossible love, and the place that it occupies is a radiant grief. How do we grieve not simply what we had but what we maybe never had? This is the question the film poses to the American Dream.

Grief is an affect out of time. In Hooper's film, this produces an intensive media of somatic terror and transmission. John Kenneth Muir labels *Spontaneous Combustion* "a big, 1950s B-movie about a man who, because of the military's testing of nukes and 'tampering in God's Domain,' becomes a terrible monster," but the film "lacks the grace to remain in the 1950s" ([2002] 2015, 123). He singles out for particular contempt a "*misconceived* sequence involv[ing] Sam's flashbacks of his mom and dad—when his mom was still carrying Sam in her womb!" (123; emphasis added). These flashbacks are early signals of the nuclear's temporal disruptions, and the film's unstable oscillation between the figure of the monster and a monstrous ecology, mediated by communications, media, and electricity.

Sam arrives home and keeps listening to the radio psychic while also taking a phone call with Lew Orlander and reading a note mysteriously left in his car. The note is an artifact from David's birth, a message from his father. In a complex web of communications technologies, of the past touching the present, the radio psychic touching the beyond, and Lew's bad dad whispering in Sam's ear, a fissure opens in Sam himself. He lights a fire, and the flames become a fiery screen consuming images from home movies of Peggy and Brian in Atom City. Later, Sam encounters these home movies "live" when he visits Nina. Rather than being "misconceived," these mediatic memories are the mutant offspring of nuclear transmission—Sam is less a person than a machine, these are less his personal memories than inscriptions of the past into his body. He ultimately witnesses their fiery death, and when he sparks back into the present, he finds his own finger on fire: nuclear memory itself is destructive to the human form.

Sam rushes to Lisa's apartment, where he discovers yet another SHC death, this time of the school doctor who treated him earlier that day, a pattern of contact and death that stalks him to the end of the film. Lisa insists that they call the radio psychic, on her neon telephone, which, like her radio, lays bare the inner workings of electronic signals. Sam tells the psychic that he "left his body" and encountered his parents, whom he never even knew. He gets distracted by his growing birthmark, which starts to smoke. On the radio, the female scientist Nina, from the original experiment, phones in and asks Sam to contact her. Sam calls back too late, and the radio technician (played in a cameo by director John Landis) won't put him through.³ Sam explodes, and finally his



Figure 11.2. Lisa (Cynthia Bain) on the receiving end of Sam's bad touches in *Spontaneous Combustion* (Tobe Hooper, Taurus Entertainment, 1990).

rage and the fire meet up and find their direct circuit: the technician catches fire through the telephone line, Lisa's flowers start to combust, and Sam's arm fissures into flame. As the technician, aflame, flails around his sound booth, the psychic remains oblivious—both sound waves and human terror fail to penetrate the walls, in a neat sonic take on the cruel isolation of SHC.

As Sam's condition worsens, he tries to tune into his mother's messages. While the original screenplay may have had a more coherent messianic role for Sam, in the final film this gets muddled. But what is not lost is the way that Sam's memories replay media recordings. He goes to Nina's home, and she reveals that the experiment tricked Peggy and Brian, that they were left deliberately exposed in the bunker to test a vaccine against radiation. She drags out a super 8 projector and shows him films of his parents that replay his visions, ultimately revealing the final link to Lew Orlander and Modern Atomic Technology. Sam pieces together that his love relations are lies, manufactured by Lew, who raised him from the age of twelve.

From a phone booth on the side of the road, Sam calls Lisa in despair and realizes that she is in on the conspiracy. His anger ratchets up and grief turns to rage. He screams at her over the phone, and as he explodes into fire, flames burst through the telephone and reach for Lisa like a hand. Sam burns two cops who try to stop him and heads to his final confrontation with Lew at his mansion,



Figure 11.3. Sam (Brad Dourif) confronting his bad daddy, Lew Orlander, in *Spontaneous Combustion* (Tobe Hooper, Taurus Entertainment, 1990).

announcing himself with “Uncle Samson is here.” Elderly, wheelchair bound, and on oxygen, Lew tells Sam that he lost patience and accelerated his encounter with Lisa in the hope of seeing the end of the experiment that started with Peggy’s pregnancy. All around Sam, electricity goes haywire, lights flicker and groan, and he continues to smoke, generating his own Gothic atmosphere. Sam is also a wreck: one eye is wholly swollen shut, he is blistered all over, and he constantly hunches over his arm. He is pale and hideous in Lew’s elegant mansion, seeking redress. “Look what you’ve done to me,” he cries. Lew, unmoved, demands his paternal due: “I’m your father,” he insists, having paid Brian to impregnate Peggy in the bunker. “I made the sun rise twice that morning, what did Brian Bell do to compare with that?” He reveals that Lisa, like Sam, is a product of the experiment, and that Lew hoped they would have a child who could control and use the SHC power. Lew exulted that such a mutant would be the “cleanest killing system on earth . . . America’s atomic man, the world’s most sophisticated nuclear weapon.”

Standing ruined before Lew, fluctuating between despair and fury, Sam gives the lie to the myth of the clean death. Sam’s power destroys him a little more every time he uses it. Each scene intensifies his grief, and it howls out of him. The howl is a hole, and Dourif plays Sam as a visual howl, his open mouth and naked woundedness a portal to the warped dimension of nuclear pain.

Nuclear death leaves a hollow in the world, and the howl tries to occupy that hollow with pure affect. The strange choice of portraying SHC as a jet of flame emerging from a hole in Sam's body is taken directly from Harrison's book and from reports of a St. Elmo's fire-like phenomenon linked to SHC death. But it finds an echo in Sam's consumptive grief, and the analog effect is intensified by the absolutely bereft nature of Dourif's performance, unafraid to be ugly. As the nuclear power plant comes online, Sam channels the core, torching himself and Lew in the process.

The film's dramatic climax has Lisa at risk from all fronts: the city around her exploding in flames, a murderous doctor trying to kill her as "just another loose end your atomic father left for me to tie up," and all the devices and machines in her building out of control as she tries to escape. Even Sam's ex-wife shows up to get in on the action, but is killed by Sam, more hideous than ever, barely recognizable under his crisped flesh. "Let me take your fire," he pleads as Lisa's hands burst into flames. She stumbles away in terror when suddenly a white light engulfs Sam and pulls him into the earth. As Lisa continues to burn, a ghostly hand emerges from the hole in the ground and absorbs her flames. Sam's impossible love sacrifices himself to save his lover and atomic sister; in the film's only moment of grace for a nuclear family, the dreadful isolation of SHC allows Sam to save the world. Mutant offspring of the military-industrial complex and its breeding program, Sam is ultimately not expelled, but absorbed back into the ambiguous ecology of the nuclear age. The power plant stays online, and people are advised to unplug anything that might be subject to unpredictable surges. Hooper's altered landscape of the nuclear family situates hell in the asphalt of a California parking lot, just under the surface.

NOTES

1. Stan Giese worked as a film journalist during the production of *Spontaneous Combustion* and wrote this fascinating behind-the-scenes account of that experience. He subsequently worked with Hooper on several projects, including *I'm Dangerous Tonight* (1990) and the TV series *Nowhere Man* (1995–1996). Giese notes that De Toth's expository explanation is drastically shortened in the final film, no doubt contributing to the incoherence of the film's connection between spontaneous combustion and the nuclear experiments. De Toth, best known for dark psychological westerns, directed the 1953 horror film *House of Wax*.

2. *Ka* is part of a tripartite understanding of the soul.

3. The technician is played by John Landis, whose cameo presence here is curious in a film about fiery disasters. Landis and other members of the production team were tried and later acquitted of manslaughter for negligence in a pyrotechnics accident that caused three deaths on the set of *The Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983). Hooper's traditionally allusive casting might be read intentionally in this context.

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CAN(N)ONICAL HOOPER

A Reconsideration of Tobe Hooper's Golan-Globus Films

IAN OLNEY

WHEN TOBE HOOPER SIGNED A three-picture deal with Cannon Films in 1983, he was savoring his first taste of mainstream success, having just helmed the blockbuster horror film *Poltergeist* (1982), produced by none other than Steven Spielberg. His contract with Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus, B-movie moguls intent on turning Cannon into a Hollywood powerhouse, seemed to ensure his future as a popular American director. Instead, the three big-budget genre pictures Hooper made for Golan and Globus—*Lifeforce* (1985), *Invaders from Mars* (1986), and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986)—effectively marked the end of his career in mainstream cinema. Although they received critical praise in some quarters, they were panned by most reviewers and failed spectacularly at the box office, consigning Hooper to the margins of the film and television industry, where he toiled until his death, in 2017. Today, they are widely viewed as costly misfires that betrayed the artistic promise and radical politics of his early work.

I offer a reconsideration of Hooper's Golan-Globus films, arguing that they are among his most interesting movies and occupy a central place in his cinematic canon. My argument rests on an analysis of how they return to and remake prior horror and science-fiction films (including his own), repurposing genre tropes in a slyly subversive manner entirely characteristic of his work as an auteur. In the guise of mass entertainment, they satirize the culture of commercialism, consumerism, and conservatism that took root in America and England in the 1980s, supplanting the countercultural spirit of the 1960s and 1970s. Ultimately, I hope to show that although they look different from his previous pictures—glossier, more polished—they share the same DNA: an impulse to confront, challenge, and blow up the status quo.

At first blush, a mid-1980s Cannon Films production might seem like an unlikely vehicle for cultural commentary. An independent motion picture

company formed in 1967, Cannon was acquired in 1979 by Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus, Israeli cousins determined to break into the American movie industry. During the 1980s, as Christoph Huber writes, they released more than 120 pictures, “ruthlessly and enthusiastically pursuing their American Dream of turning a renegade independent outfit into the seventh Hollywood major with an aggressive pre-sales policy and an insanely prolific schedule for cheap production, [centering] on trashy exploitation fare” (Huber 2010, 36). Indeed, Cannon is mostly remembered for low-budget schlock that brazenly cashed in on hot trends in mainstream cinema and pop culture: raunchy teen comedies such as *The Last American Virgin* (Boaz Davidson, 1982), urban dance musicals such as *Breakin’ 2: Electric Boogaloo* (Sam Firstenberg, 1984), and Chuck Norris action flicks, including *Missing in Action* (Joseph Zito, 1984) and *Invasion U.S.A.* (Zito, 1985). These movies blurred “the distinction between rip-off and re-imagination” (37), mixing and matching elements of hit films to create unlikely pastiches that seldom bettered the originals. In the amusing 2014 documentary *Electric Boogaloo: The Wild, Untold Story of Cannon Films* (Mark Hartley, 2014), the former Cannon music supervisor Richard Kraft describes Golan, who handled production and promotion while Globus focused on the financial end of the business, this way: “[He] loved the intersection of ideas that should never meet each other. So he assembles, like Frankenstein, parts of other movies and creates a disaster.” Surprisingly, this formula worked well enough for the better part of a decade until a series of bad investments and expensive flops (including Hooper’s three films for Cannon) sank the studio, leading to its takeover by Pathé Communications in 1989.

There was more to Cannon Films than its reputation as a purveyor of 1980s schlock suggests. Shrewd entrepreneurs, Golan and Globus were also true cinephiles with a deep appreciation for art cinema. Alongside cheap exploitation fare, they bankrolled serious movies by major international auteurs. Among them was John Cassavetes’s late masterpiece *Love Streams* (1984), which won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival. They also financed Jean-Luc Godard’s typically idiosyncratic Shakespeare adaptation *King Lear* (1987), the contract for which was famously scrawled on the back of a napkin during a lunch meeting between Godard and Golan at the Cannes Film Festival. Other art-house movies released by Cannon during the 1980s include works by Robert Altman, Franco Zeffirelli, Norman Mailer, and Dušan Makavejev. Golan and Globus allowed these artists great latitude as long as they kept to the agreed-on budget and shooting schedule—something the filmmakers greatly appreciated. Zeffirelli, who directed a 1986 adaptation of the Verdi opera *Otello* for Cannon, called them “the best producers I ever worked for” (quoted in *Electric Boogaloo*). They also impressed the film critic Roger Ebert, who opined in 1987 that

"no other production organization in the world today—certainly not any of the seven Hollywood 'majors'—has taken more chances with serious, marginal films than Cannon" ([1987] 2016, 109). In truth, Cannon's "cheerfully schizo" (109) practice of juggling low-budget genre movies and highbrow art-house films while securing cash flow through "advance sales to different distributors and video companies in many territories" (Huber 2010, 37) was not so different from the strategy employed in the 1980s by renowned "mini-majors" such as Miramax and New Line Cinema. One could argue that Golan and Globus, too, helped lay the foundation for the golden age of American independent filmmaking that followed in the 1990s.

In any event, Hooper found his arrangement with Cannon in the mid-1980s conducive to the kind of work he was interested in doing as a director. He later remarked that "Cannon was really a good company to work for" because Golan and Globus "loved the movies and the filmmakers and really treated them well. It seemed more, when I was there, like maybe what the old system was like. I miss that kind of showmanship and risk-taking" (quoted in Huber 2010, 36). Although Hooper's three pictures for Cannon were commercial disappointments, and although Golan and Globus were not above second-guessing his vision (as they did on *Lifeorce*, which was both truncated and recut for its theatrical release in the United States), he was accorded a measure of artistic respect and creative freedom on these projects that he almost certainly would not have received at a major Hollywood studio. Moreover, Hooper's approach as an auteur—John Kenneth Muir describes him as a "maestro of the *homage* . . . gazing back at the history of horror films that he grew up with and adored" while simultaneously displaying a "willingness to leap outside the barriers of traditional film narrative to take audiences on ever more wild rides" ([2002] 2015, 5)—meshed well with Cannon's house style of cinematic pastiche and "re-imagination." Whereas many of the company's genre movies were witless rip-offs, textbook examples of what Fredric Jameson calls "blank parody" (1991, 17) or postmodern recycling "amputated of the satiric impulse" and "devoid of laughter" (17), Hooper's "remixes" were not only artistically accomplished, but also politically charged. Indeed, by employing his habitual "distancing techniques of comedy and subversive wit" (Muir [2002] 2015, 116), the director fashioned a trio of films as radical in their critique of mainstream American culture as any of his celebrated early films.

Many critics have applauded the progressiveness of the films Hooper made in the 1970s, often focusing their attention on *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), his most widely known and highly respected picture. One of the first was Robin Wood, who dubbed Hooper's 1970s horror movies (and those of contemporaries such as George A. Romero and Wes Craven) "apocalyptic"

because of the way they imagined “the end of the highly specific world of patriarchal capitalism” (1986, 191–192).¹ Although Wood allowed that these films were ideologically “incoherent” to the extent that they did not entertain the possibility of an alternative to the modern American society in collapse (50), he argued that they are nonetheless “progressive in so far as their negativity is not recuperable into the dominant ideology, but constitutes, on the contrary, the recognition of that ideology’s disintegration and its untenability, as all it has repressed explodes and blows it apart” (192). In a well-known anecdote about his “terrifying” experience of watching *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* with a “large, half-stoned youth audience who cheered and applauded every one of Leatherface’s outrages against their representatives on screen” (93), Wood singled out Hooper’s movie as an especially powerful example of “a civilization condemning itself, through its popular culture, to ultimate disintegration, and ambivalently (with the simultaneous horror/wish-fulfillment of nightmare) celebrating the fact” (94). Contemporary scholars such as Matt Becker have added nuance and context to Wood’s influential argument by linking the ambivalence and apocalyptic outlook of 1970s horror with the despair of the hippie counterculture, which “had its considerable hopes in the possibility of significant social change undercut by the immense social traumas of the late 1960s and early 1970s” (2006, 43). But the claim that films like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* represent, at least in part, a radical political response to their historical moment remains more or less uncontested. No such claim has been made about Hooper’s later movies, which have been characterized as commercial, even reactionary sellouts. His films for Golan and Globus demonstrate, however, that he continued his leftist critique of patriarchal capitalism well into the 1980s, tailoring it to suit the times, which saw the tattered dreams of the counterculture give way to a neoconservative nightmare.

This critique is perhaps most apparent in the second and third pictures Hooper directed for Cannon, *Invaders from Mars* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, because of their use of outright satire. Beginning with a consideration of them will enable us to better discern the critique’s subtler contours in *Lifeorce*, Hooper’s first film for Golan and Globus. Largely forgotten today, *Invaders from Mars*, a remake of the 1953 sci-fi classic of the same title directed and designed by William Cameron Menzies, was dismissed by many critics at the time of its release as a crass attempt to capitalize both on middle-aged baby boomers’ nostalgia for the original and on the success of one of the most popular blockbusters of the 1980s, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982). It is true that Hooper’s version essentially recapitulates the story of the first film, focusing on a boy whose world is turned upside down when Martians land in his backyard and take over the citizens of his small town, starting with

his parents; even Menzies's memorably downbeat ending, in which the invasion turns out to be a bad dream but then recurs in reality, is preserved. And Hooper incorporates the kind of homages and in-jokes often found in remakes, including a detailed re-creation of the aliens' iconic landing site, just over a hill topped by a split-rail fence, and the impish casting of Jimmy Hunt, who played the young hero of the original movie, as the Martian-controlled chief of police.² The film undeniably borrows a number of elements from *E.T.* as well: a suburban Los Angeles setting, a science class frog-dissection scene, and an attention to children's toys and pop culture; M&M's candy even makes an appearance, subbing in for Reese's Pieces. It is not unreasonable to assume that these elements were added in the hope that Cannon's boy-meets-aliens picture might duplicate the box-office success of Spielberg's monster hit.

To assume that the film is nothing more than a calculated effort to cash in on those two movies, though, would be a serious mistake. Hooper's *Invaders from Mars* is less a remake than a remix sampling Menzies's classic and Spielberg's blockbuster to paint a bleak, albeit darkly comic, portrait of a country that lost its way during the Reagan era. The original *Invaders from Mars*, like other 1950s sci-fi films, is frequently read as a Cold War allegory addressing Americans' fears about communist invasion and infiltration. It can also be understood, however, as an early expression of the suspicion with which the young regarded the old in the 1960s—a suspicion crystallized in the immortal injunction of the New Left activist Jack Weinberg: "Don't trust anyone over thirty." After all, this is a movie in which virtually every adult authority figure, including parents and the police, is a robotic victim of alien mind control intent on the subjugation of a little boy. It anticipates the intergenerational conflict of the following decade, when baby boomers in their teens and twenties rejected the conformism and compliance demanded by their elders. Hooper's version of Menzies's movie updates this concept and turns it on its head. In the remake, middle-aged boomers are the soulless monsters oppressing their children. And the suburbs, sanctified as a symbol of middle-class, middle-American values in Spielberg's picture, offer a nightmarish reflection of their moral corruption. Its status as mainstream, family-friendly fare notwithstanding, the film amounts to a sly indictment of the way in which the youth of the 1960s, having lost their faith in the possibility of meaningful social change, embraced capitalism and conservatism as adults in the 1980s.

Although it has often been missed by critics, Hooper's satirical intent is evident throughout the movie. It tells the story of David Gardner, a young boy whose warm, loving parents are transformed by invading Martians into callous yuppies concerned only with carrying out the aliens' evil scheme to plunder Earth's natural resources. Most of the movie's other adults are brainwashed

as well, including David's teachers, the police, and members of the military and scientific community at a nearby NASA installation. The few adults who escape the Martians' control, like David's sympathetic school nurse, are largely ineffectual in their attempts to stave off the alien menace. Hooper frames this as a generational failure through his casting, which fills the adult roles in the film with icons of countercultural Hollywood cinema: Timothy Bottoms of *The Last Picture Show* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1971), Louise Fletcher of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Miloš Forman, 1975), Karen Black of *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970), and Bud Cort of *Harold and Maude* (Hal Ashby, 1971). Also crucial is his selection of Hunt to play the sinister chief of police; no mere homage, it hammers home the message that far from escaping the fate of their elders, boomers *became* their parents, repeating the mistakes of the previous generation. The film implies that their principal sin was their surrender to capitalism, which it evokes through the brainwashed adults' icy yuppie affect and enslavement to the rapacious Martians, reimagined by the special effects wizard Stan Winston as little more than fang-filled reptilian maws on spindly legs.³ Boomer consumerism and conformism is also evoked through the suburban setting, which Hooper does not idealize, à la *E.T.*, but instead presents as a "psychosocial wasteland deforming its inhabitants into robotic drones" (Latham 1995, 201).

Meanwhile, the turn toward social conservatism and "traditional" family values that accompanied the boomers' embrace of capitalism in the 1980s is suggested by a pair of scenes involving the indoctrination of David's parents. In the first, his father, already under alien control, tells his mother at dinner that the two of them are going to take an evening stroll—"after [she] does the dishes." "After I do the dishes?" she replies incredulously. "George, you're acting very strange." In the following scene, she is shown dutifully preparing breakfast in the kitchen, now under alien control as well. No longer interested in her business-school studies, she has become the "perfect" housewife. Ultimately, Hooper's *Invaders from Mars* stands as a cutting caricature of the Reagan era, one that lays the blame for the resurgence of patriarchal capitalism squarely at the feet of his own generation and holds out little hope for the next. As the film's borrowed—but artfully repurposed—ending reminds us, history tends to repeat itself.

The director's final film for Golan and Globus, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, makes much the same point, albeit in a far ghastlier manner. It features the return of the murderous family of former slaughterhouse workers from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*—now named, tongue in cheek, the Sawyers—who have prospered as the operators of the Last Roundup Rolling Grill, a food truck serving the barbecued remains of their unfortunate victims. When their business is threatened by a local DJ named Vanita "Stretch" Brock, who captures



Figure 12.1. Young David (Hunter Carson), menaced by rapacious aliens and his brain-washed boomer parents in *Invaders from Mars* (Tobe Hooper, Cannon Films, 1986).

their latest slaying on tape and alerts Lieutenant “Lefty” Enright, a Texas Ranger obsessed with avenging the deaths of his brother’s kids at their hands, the family targets her, leading to a climactic confrontation in their secret lair below the abandoned Texas Battle Land amusement park. Hooper’s sequel was much anticipated by admirers of the first movie, an undisputed landmark of modern horror cinema. It disappointed fans and critics alike, however, who decried its reliance on graphic violence (almost entirely absent in the original, despite its gory reputation) and its overt use of black humor (in lieu of what was widely perceived to be the original’s gritty realism). The film, Hooper’s third commercial failure in a row for Cannon, remains underappreciated today. But it was precisely the picture the director wanted to make—the result, he said after its release, of his “frustration at the comedy of the first film not being appreciated or understood” (Savlov 1998). Deliberately adopting a “wacky, crazy, bizarre, over-the-top” (Savlov 1998) approach to the material, an approach supported by the legendary makeup artist Tom Savini’s outrageously gruesome effects, he expanded the cultural critique of his 1974 masterwork, again crafting a sly satire on the resurgence of capitalism and conservatism during the 1980s.⁴

As he does in *Invaders from Mars*, Hooper takes aim in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* at the unrestrained commercialism and consumerism of the Reagan era. In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the focus is on the dog-eat-dog

economics of the 1970s recession, which force the family of unemployed slaughterhouse workers (put out of a job by factory automation) to turn to murder to make ends meet. Butchering unwary trespassers and selling the cooked meat as barbeque at a local gas station, they demonstrate, in Wood's words, that cannibalism is "the logical end of human relations under capitalism" (1986, 91). Hooper's sequel updates the original to take into account the economic boom of the 1980s. The Sawyers are no longer backwoods hillbillies but respected businessmen whose product is in demand across the state. Indeed, when we first meet the oldest brother, Drayton, he is accepting a trophy for the best chili in Texas and Oklahoma—for the second year in a row. As the face of the family's growing culinary empire, he behaves throughout the movie like any Reagan-era entrepreneur, admonishing his younger brothers Leatherface and Chop-Top to "chase that dollar," while grouching that the "damn property taxes fuck up everything" and the "small businessman gets it in the ass every time."

Significantly, though, the film's criticism of Reaganomics encompasses not only the Sawyers' behavior as ghastly capitalists but also their customers' behavior as gruesome consumers. The locals who line up for the family's award-winning barbeque are unwitting cannibals, but it is their insatiable appetite that fuels the whole enterprise—as Hooper suggests when Drayton, gleefully anticipating the rush of hungry regulars ahead of the big Texas-Oklahoma football game, crows: "I love this town!" In truth, it is the consumerism of the average American that has enabled them to make a killing during the "Decade of Greed."

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2 foregrounds the attack on 1980s conservatism implicit in *Invaders from Mars*, savaging the Reagan-era return to patriarchal attitudes and "traditional" family values. In his pioneering analysis of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, Wood notes that the film overturns the conservative ideology of many classic horror movies by making the family (formerly representative of normality) the monster and the home (once suggestive of safety and familiarity) the locus of horror (1986, 90–91). Moreover, since the family is all-male—consisting of three adult brothers and their ancient grandfather—and women are the "ultimate object of [its] malice," the film offers a terrifying take on patriarchal rule, epitomized by "Leatherface and his continuously whirring phallic chainsaw" (91). Hooper's sequel both broadens the commentary of the original and sharpens its feminist edge, employing satirical humor to deflate the Sawyers' pretensions to patriarchal power and featuring a heroine who in the end claims the chain saw and triumphs over them. To begin with, it underscores once more that the Sawyers are not outliers in, but avatars of, American culture in the Reagan era—especially in deep-red Texas.⁵ Their monstrous masculinity is linked with the state's macho obsession with guns, football, big hats, and bigger trucks, as well as to its violent jingoism, evoked

by the Sawyers' home in Texas Battle Land, which invites visitors to "refight the battle of San Jacinto" and which Chop-Top, a Vietnam veteran with a steel plate in his head, wants to reopen as 'Nam Land. ("It's what the public wants!" he insists, and he seems to be right.)⁶

At the same time, the sequel constantly undercuts the patriarchal authority of the Sawyer family. Key in this regard is its treatment of Leatherface: far from the fearsome fiend of the first film, he is depicted as a rather pathetic figure who, in one notorious scene, is unable to "perform" with his chain saw when he becomes smitten with Stretch after cornering her at her radio station. Also key is its treatment of Stretch, who, as Carol J. Clover observes, "assumes the 'active investigating gaze'" in the movie, "making a spectacle of the killer and a spectator of herself" (1992, 60). It is she who finally seizes the chain saw to defeat the last member of the Sawyer clan at the film's climax, not Dennis Hopper's crazed Texas Ranger, who "proves so utterly ineffectual that he cannot save himself, much less the girl" (38). While *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* acknowledges the resurgent conservatism and capitalism of 1980s America, then, it also mercilessly skewers them through its lampooning of the grotesque Sawyers, who, like the aliens in *Invaders from Mars*, represent the worst excesses of the Reagan era.

The cultural critique running through Hooper's final two films for Cannon is not as immediately apparent in his first, *Lifeforce*, which relies less on outright satire than on a subtle upending of genre conventions to make its point. The director's more muted approach was due in part to the picture's higher profile: Golan and Globus, hoping for a huge blockbuster, budgeted it at \$25 million—more than twice what they allotted for *Invaders from Mars* and ten times what they earmarked for *Chainsaw Massacre 2*—making it their most expensive movie to date.⁷ Hooper was also constrained by the script, which was not original but an adaptation of Colin Wilson's 1976 sci-fi novel *The Space Vampires*. The story involves the crew of the British-American space shuttle *Churchill*, led by Colonel Tom Carlsen, encountering a derelict alien ship hidden in the tail of Halley's comet. Onboard they find three nude humanoids—two men and a beautiful woman, credited only as Space Girl—preserved in crystalline cases, seemingly dead. When the aliens are brought to a research center in England, however, they awaken and escape, seeking the life force of human victims, who, once drained, also become energy vampires. Carlsen, who shares a special telepathic bond with Space Girl, is tasked with locating and destroying them before London is overrun by the undead. In addition to Wilson's novel, which is clearly modeled on Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), *Lifeforce* owes much to landmark British sci-fi films such as Roy Ward Baker's *Quatermass and the Pit* (1967) and Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979).⁸ Despite this debt and the constraints

under which the director labored—and despite rare interference from Golan and Globus, who, concerned about the film's commercial prospects, reedited it twice after seeing the first cut—Hooper managed to create a movie that, like his next two pictures for Cannon, offers an incisive critique of the cultural transformations of the 1980s.⁹ He again trains his sights on the decade's rampant capitalism—embodied by monsters who, like those of *Invaders from Mars*, are rapacious aliens seeking to extract Earth's resources—but reserves his heaviest fire for the conservatism of Thatcher-era England, particularly its regressive attitudes toward sex and gender.¹⁰

In its treatment of gender, *Lifeforce* deconstructs patriarchal notions about femininity by subverting the conventions of horror and science-fiction cinema. Hooper starts by disrupting the male gaze, which is frequently privileged by these genres. The film is infamous for its female nudity: in the role of Space Girl, Mathilda May is unclothed for much of her time on-screen. But like the supposedly graphic violence of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, which is largely implied instead of shown, the nudity in *Lifeforce* is not as extensive or explicit as the movie's reputation would suggest. May is in the picture for fewer than fifteen minutes, with most of her scenes falling at the beginning and end. And while she appears fully nude or topless in a number of shots, Hooper often obscures our view of her body through his use of framing, shadows, and props. Furthermore, given the dangerous nature of her character, May's nudity comes across as confrontational rather than salacious—an affront to the male gaze. After all, Space Girl uses her body to disarm and draw in her victims, who are mostly (though not all) men. By weaponizing female “to-be-looked-at-ness,” she essentially turns the male gaze against itself, much as Stretch does in her interactions with Leatherface in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*. It is crucial to keep in mind that Space Girl is not actually a woman—or even human—but a shape-shifting alien that has taken its form from Carlsen's imagination, becoming the “feminine in [his] mind” and embodying his “deepest thoughts . . . [and] deepest needs.” As Dr. Hans Fallada, the film's Van Helsing figure, puts it: “That girl [is] no girl. She's totally alien to this planet and our life form.” The character is a perfect metaphor for the image of “woman” under British patriarchy in the 1980s, not a real human being but a phantasmal projection of male desire. Like the alien at the center of Jonathan Glazer's acclaimed sci-fi movie *Under the Skin* (2013), a being that masquerades as a woman in order to seduce men and harvest their flesh, Space Girl “denaturalize[s] customary ways of seeing identity” (Osterweil 2014, 50). The fact that “she” is a figment of the male hero's imagination tells us more about him—and the culture that produced him—than it does about “her.” Instead of linking femininity with monstrosity, as many horror and sci-fi films do, *Lifeforce* interrogates the very idea

Figure 12.2. Weaponizing female “to-be-looked-at-ness”: Mathilda May as the shape-shifting Space Girl in *Lifeforce* (Tobe Hooper, Golan-Globus Productions, Easedram Limited, and London-Cannon Films, 1985).



of femininity, revealing the insubstantiality of a concept crucial to patriarchal constructions of gender during the Thatcher era.

Likewise, Hooper challenges the neoconservatism of 1980s England by upending the conventions that govern the depiction of sexuality in horror and science-fiction cinema. He does so, in the first place, through his representation of female desire, which in the film poses a profound threat to the patriarchal order. Again like *Under the Skin*, *Lifeforce* “presents female sexuality without apology,” focusing on a woman whose “alien identity annuls the questions about human morality that smother conversations about sexuality, enabling her to desire without shame” (Osterweil 2014, 47). Behaving as a desiring subject instead of an object of desire, Space Girl radically upsets the balance of sexual power under patriarchy. Her desire also threatens heterosexual norms under patriarchy, since she seduces female as well as male victims. In cinema—from sexploitation films to mainstream movies—lesbianism and female bisexuality are often packaged as erotic spectacle for the straight male viewer in order to defuse the threat they represent. Significantly, Hooper chooses to keep Space Girl’s seduction of women offscreen, declining to “make it safe” for patriarchal

heteronormativity. At the same time, he stages several scenes of male homoeroticism, triggered by Space Girl, far more explicitly than was the norm in Hollywood cinema at the time. Once reanimated, her undead victims seek out conquests heedless of gender, resulting in several instances of male-on-male vampirism.¹¹ And her ability to hop into other people's bodies leads to a memorable scene in which she seduces Carlsen while inside the body of the male asylum director, Dr. Armstrong (Patrick Stewart). Although the homoerotic charge of this seduction—a moment that does not occur in Wilson's novel—was softened for the movie's American release through the insertion of alternate reverse-angle shots of May rather than Stewart as Carlsen moves in for a kiss, it remains (literally) electric in the longer UK version of the film, which shows Carlsen and Armstrong locking lips.

Peter Wright has argued that *Lifeforce*, like other British post-*Alien* "invasion films," adopts a "conservative, patriarchal view of women and sex," warning of the dangers of "unrestrained female sexual desires" and finally exorcising the specter of the "sexually liberated, self-reliant woman" (1999, 138, 146, 149). The movie ends, though, not with Space Girl's death but with her transcendence. After tracking her to a London abbey, Carlsen impales her (and himself) on a phallic leaded sword, but this simply releases her disembodied alien form, which floats back up to its waiting ship, ready to embark on the conquest of yet other worlds.¹²

Interviewed a few years before his death for a documentary on the creation of *Lifeforce*, Hooper enthused that the movie allowed him to "go back to [his] roots and make a 70 mm Hammer film" (*Cannon Fodder*, Calum Waddell and Naomi Holwill, 2013). I hope my discussion of *Lifeforce* has demonstrated, however, that it is not simply a "70 mm Hammer film"—nor is it the blatant rip-off of *Alien* that many critics accused it of being at the time of its release. Instead, it is a movie that in distinctive Hooperian fashion turns the conventions of horror and science-fiction cinema inside out in order to confront, challenge, and blow up the status quo. Like *Invaders* and *Chainsaw Massacre 2*, it is best seen as a remix rather than a pastiche or a remake. While it eschews the overt satire and black comedy of those later films, it is just as incisive in its critique of patriarchal capitalism in the 1980s, especially in its treatment of sex and gender. Indeed, a consideration of *Lifeforce* in light of the next two movies Hooper directed for Cannon makes it clear that he was intent on pursuing such a critique in his cinema from the moment he signed with the studio. Far from abandoning the progressive principles of his earlier work, he stuck to his proverbial guns in the supposedly mainstream films he made for Golan and Globus, blasting the return to conservatism on both sides of the Atlantic and taking the counterculture to task for its surrender to the Decade of Greed. That the

resolutely political nature of these films is not generally recognized lends real weight to Muir's assertion that Hooper's movies were "overlooked or seriously misinterpreted during their theatrical runs in the late 1980s" ([2002] 2015, 3).

It is likely that Hooper's pictures for Golan and Globus have been overlooked and misinterpreted not only because they were Cannon releases, but also because they are horror movies from the 1980s, a decade in the genre's history that many critics and scholars regard with disdain. Eighties horror, the story goes, traded the gritty realism and radical politics of 1970s horror for glossy commercialism and reactionary conservatism. This line of thinking can again be traced back to Wood, who, writing in 1986, lamented the "decline—worse, the hideous perversion of [horror's] essential meaning—in the 80s," contending that Reagan-era horror films worked to "diminish, defuse, and render safe all the major radical movements that gained so much impetus, became so threatening, in the '70s: radical feminism, black militancy, gay liberation, the assault on the patriarchy" (1986, 70, 164). Although he allowed at the time that one might "reasonably hold out hope for Tobe Hooper," he insisted that there was "little to salvage from the period," that "with the end of the seventies, the prevailing current began to flow in quite another direction," leading to the ascendancy of horror's "reactionary wing" (188, 191). Wood's view of 1980s horror is virtually gospel today. It is reflected, for example, in Jason Zinoman's *Shock Value*, a popular book on modern American horror cinema that devotes an entire chapter to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* while dismissing *Lifeforce* in three words as an "outer space flop" (2011, 230). Hooper's Golan-Globus films are, of course, doubly suspect because they were released by Cannon, a studio whose schlock "in many ways defined the cinema of the '80s" (Huber 2010, 36). But as Huber notes, Cannon's "shameless appropriation of current fads" made its movies "a peculiar X-ray of the Reagan years" (37). This is especially true of Hooper's three films for the company, which, cleverly remixing earlier horror and sci-fi movies, not only expose the monstrousness of 1980s capitalism and conservatism in the United States and abroad, but also demonstrate their absolute centrality to the director's cinematic canon.

NOTES

1. Writing at around the same time, Christopher Sharrett likewise described Hooper's 1970s horror—and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* in particular—as apocalyptic. He departed from Wood's Marxist-Freudian reading of the film, however, to focus on its connection with a "long history of millennialism in American art" (2004, 300) and its evocation of the "general bankruptcy of myth and communal belief in the contemporary world" (319).

2. Other nods to the original in Hooper's film include making David a student at "Menzie's Elementary School" and slipping a replica of the famous glass-bubbled

“Martian Intelligence” from Menzies’s movie into a scene that takes place in the school’s basement.

3. Significantly, Hooper does not let himself off the hook for his generation’s failures. At one point early in the film, David returns home after school and, finding his house eerily empty, turns on the television for company. He happens upon a broadcast of Hooper’s *Lifeforce*, released by Cannon the year before, and is transfixed by the spectacle of vampiric aliens and their undead victims running amok in London. One could regard this as a cynical bit of self-promotion on Hooper’s (or the studio’s) part, but I think that would be an error. I read it, first, as an attempt to connect the critique of 1980s consumerism in *Invaders from Mars* with that in *Lifeforce* (another film featuring rapacious extraterrestrials), and, second, as an admission by Hooper that, as a boomer and member of the counterculture who left the world of independent filmmaking to “go Hollywood” in the 1980s, he was inescapably implicated in the decade’s hypercapitalism.

4. The satirical bent of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* is evident even from the poster created for the film, which spoofs the promotional art for the previous year’s *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985), with a family portrait of the Sawyer clan striking the same poses as the teenage heroes on the poster for Hughes’s hit movie.

5. A native of Austin, Hooper grew up familiar with the current of violent hyper-masculinity coursing through Texas culture. He illuminates it in the film not only through the murderous actions of the Sawyer family, but also through the toxic behavior of ordinary Texan men, including the trigger-happy preppies shooting up highway signs in the movie’s opening scenes, the rowdy football fans (including the director, in a brief cameo) mobbing a hotel the night before the “Red River Showdown” (an annual football game between the University of Texas and the University of Oklahoma), and the elderly proprietor of Cut-Rite Chain Saws, who watches with almost orgasmic glee as Lefty maniacally attacks a pile of logs in front of the store with the power saws he purchased to do battle with the Sawyers.

6. Hooper is clearly commenting here on America’s obsession with the Vietnam War during the 1980s, which manifested itself in the public appetite for violent action movies such as *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George P. Cosmatos, 1985) and Cannon’s own *Missing in Action* (1984). It is also telling that the Sawyers bought their food truck with money from the government pension that Chop-Top receives for his war injury—a detail that cements the connection between the family’s murderousness and that displayed by the nation at large in Southeast Asia.

7. *Lifeforce* was a major production not just by Cannon’s standards but by Hollywood’s at the time. Its budget was comparable to those of studio blockbusters such as 1983’s *Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand, \$32.5 million), 1984’s *Ghostbusters* (Ivan Reitman, \$30 million), and 1985’s *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, \$19 million). And like other Hollywood blockbusters, it opened wide in the United States, getting a saturation release in multiplex theaters across the country in the summer of 1985.

8. *Alien*’s co-screenwriter Dan O’Bannon also coscripted *Lifeforce* and *Invaders from Mars*.

9. The creative interference that Hooper faced on *Lifeforce* began when he presented Golan and Globus with his first cut of the film, which clocked in at 128 minutes. They trimmed this version to 116 minutes for the movie’s theatrical release in the UK and created an even shorter, alternate cut, running 101 minutes, for its release in the US, apparently at the behest of their American distributor, TriStar. Hooper’s original

version is not commercially available as of this writing and may no longer exist.

10. While *Lifeforce* may rely less on outright satire to communicate its critique of 1980s culture than Hooper's next two movies for Cannon did, it is not quite accurate to suggest, as some critics have, that the film displays a "total and utter lack of humor" (Muir [2002] 2015, 102). Hollywood posturing aside, it has a definite camp quality, a ripeness teetering on the edge of genre parody, that derives from the sheer lunacy of its premise, its brazen nudity and queer overtones, and its hammy performances—in particular the crazed portrayal of Carlsen essayed by Steve Railsback, a Texas actor best known at the time for playing Charles Manson in the TV miniseries *Helter Skelter* (Tom Gries, 1976). Its campiness clues viewers in to the fact that it is something other than a straightforward sci-fi film and also helps explain its status as a cult "schlockbuster."

11. In these scenes, male vampires drain the life force from male victims, transforming them into emaciated husks of their former selves who, to restore their vitality, must feed on yet other victims, sparking an outbreak of homoerotic behavior. Muir reads this as a comment on the era's "rising 'gay plague,' a dangerous sexually transmitted disease of the early 1980s later identified as AIDS and recognized as an epidemic" ([2002] 2015, 98). It could just as easily, though, be read as a comment on gay repression and liberation in the 1980s—that to enjoy vital and fulfilling lives, gay men should embrace their sexual identity and inspire others to do the same.

12. It is worth noting that *Space Girl*'s ambiguous sex and gender as an alien are reflected in the design of "her" ship, which from the outside appears phallic, with a long thin body and a bulbous head that unfurls into an umbrella-like structure to collect the life force harvested by the space vampires, but on the inside features a vaginal passageway that opens onto a large uterine cavity.

HOOPER'S HOLLYWOOD

Investigating Occult Spaces in *Toolbox Murders*

NINA K. MARTIN

TOBE HOOPER'S *TOOLBOX MURDERS* (2004), a reimagining of Denis Donnelly's 1978 exploitation slasher of the same name, seems like a typical slasher on the surface, but its dance with Los Angeles's occult history nods toward the days of the Black Dahlia, Jack Parsons, and L. Ron Hubbard. The killer in *Toolbox Murders*, the masked and disfigured Coffin Baby, creatively murders some eccentric residents of the under-renovation Lusman Arms. Yet the film's slasher story line takes a backseat midfilm to the Gothic thrills crafted by Hooper as his intrepid hero, Nell, investigates the ever-shifting boundaries of the Lusman's forbidding "terrible place," a secret townhouse hidden within the hotel's crumbling walls (Clover 2015, 80–81). Steeped in Hollywood lore and occult imagery, *Toolbox Murders* not only provides some satisfying kills, but also stands as a symbol of Hooper's ambivalence toward the Hollywood industry—a place where dreams of success and stardom can turn into the most horrific nightmares. One where an exciting director's career can just disappear. *Toolbox Murders* prefigures more recent Hollywood horror films in which "making it" there can occur only through dark occult rituals and black magic rites. Using Hooper's characteristically gritty aesthetic, *Toolbox Murders* provides a suitably jaundiced look at the realities simmering under Hollywood's dazzling and glamorous surface, and at the price one must pay to feel at home there.

Toolbox Murders opens with an ominous title card: "Every year thousands of people come to Hollywood to pursue their dreams. Some succeed. Some move back home . . . and some just disappear." Immediately, Hooper sets up the film's primary tension between the Hollywood where dreams can come true—for the few—and the Hollywood of so many nightmares. The film represents this either-or dichotomy through its oddly divided narrative structure, veering from typical slasher territory to that of the Gothic woman's film in its shift to a female-led investigative journey midway through. The bulk of the film's



Figure 13.1. A canted angle on the Lusman Arms in *Toolbox Murders* (Tobe Hooper, Lionsgate Films, 2005).

story follows newlywed couple Nell and Steven Barrows as they move into the Lusman Arms, a former luxury hotel that has seen better days. Because of the massive renovations under way, apartments are going for a \$900 deposit and no rent for sixty days—a bargain by Los Angeles standards, even in 2004. Such a deal attracts a variety of Hollywood hopefuls eking out a living while going to auditions and attending callbacks, struggling to stay afloat. Those Lusman residents strikingly contrast with Nell and Steven, who are not in LA seeking fame and fortune; Steven is starting a residency at a nearby hospital, and Nell searches for a job as a teacher. Their banal normalcy serves them well, since the masked killer does not initially target the couple, but instead repeatedly and terminally separates wannabe performers from the path to stardom.

Toolbox Murders maintains its slasher vibe in a series of elaborate murder set pieces carried out by a masked, seemingly invincible killer, Coffin Baby. These glorious kills are gruesome and horrifying, but also frequently humorous. While the renovation of the Lusman Arms seems to be the killer's primary trigger, his targets are explicitly those tenants who are struggling to succeed in Hollywood. The opening kill acquaints spectators with the film's sinister setting during a torrential downpour. A tenant, Daisy Rain, grabs a couple of packs of cigarettes at a nearby newsstand, the kiosk swathed in plastic sheets in order to keep out the elements. The apartment building overpowers the Los Angeles landscape, looming above in a repeated series of canted angles that render the building monstrous at every turn. The rain sweeps over Daisy in an homage to Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977): as she clutches her pale trench coat, rushing sans umbrella into

the entrance, the camera lingers on a series of strange symbols marking the pavement under her feet. Unlike many of the early victims in slasher films, Daisy is shown in an extremely sympathetic light, stopping to engage in pleasantries with the clerk at the newspaper kiosk and with Luis, the door attendant, despite her apparent exhaustion from working at a diner. When she hears about an accident that has sent one of the workers to the hospital, her response is rich with empathy. This hardworking young woman cares about others.

Hooper makes clear from her answering-machine messages that Daisy is an aspiring actor, grumbling under her breath at the rescheduling of a callback for a role. Having deployed the numerous locks on her apartment door, she pours herself a glass of wine and slips into a slinky red robe as she begins to relax. When she returns from changing out of her wet clothes, all four of her locks are hanging open, the door slightly ajar. Moments later, a masked killer wielding the claw end of a hammer attacks her. Hooper quickly cuts away from the gore to the artful spatter of blood on the apartment window, framing the teeming streets of LA, car lights twinkling through the deep red of stained glass. This sequence deftly establishes the relationship between the murder and the shattering of a Hollywood hopeful's dreams. Daisy simply disappears.

The masked killer cuts short dreams of fame, but often with a stroke of black humor to lessen the blow to the viewer—a common Hooper touch. Not long after Daisy's death, the hospital calls Steven away, and Nell hears screaming behind one of the apartment doors. The cops arrive only to discover that her neighbors Hudson and Byron are running lines from a horror screenplay as Hudson prepares for his audition. Once the police depart, Hudson exclaims with delight, "Dude, this part is mine!" Later, he is snatched from above while riding the Lusman's unreliable elevator. A would-be singer named Saffron, another of Nell and Steven's neighbors, strums a guitar while singing "Surrealistic Summer," spouting lyrics such as "As I sit here, slowly waiting / I feel just like a Dali painting." She accidentally drops her guitar pick and thus misses her assailant standing in the doorway with a nail gun until he handily nails her to the wall. Upon hearing Saffron's cries for help, Nell's second call to the cops reveals an empty apartment with no signs of struggle. Yet as the authorities leave once again, eyeing Nell suspiciously, the camera sweeps back into Saffron's apartment and up to the ceiling to show her nailed there, opening her eyes to reveal that she is still alive. Nell cannot get a break, for the first friend she appears to make, the aspiring actor (and newly thin) Julia is done in with a power drill to the head before they can spend any time exploring Los Angeles together. The killer's hunger for Hollywood-star wannabes, even if they are represented as kind and sympathetic characters, signifies the film's ambivalence toward Hollywood and those who struggle to succeed there.

HOOPER IN HOLLYWOOD

Hooper had a fraught relationship with Hollywood. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*'s innovative take on the horror film, combined with its financial success, attracted industry heavyweights, including the suggestion by William Friedkin that he be hired to direct the sequel to *The Exorcist*.¹ Yet as John Kenneth Muir points out, "On the strength of this virtuoso debut, Hooper went to Hollywood—and was subsequently denied final cut on every motion picture with his name on it for more than a decade" (Muir [2002] 2015, 4). *Toolbox Murders* illustrates his ambivalence toward the place and the system within which he struggled throughout his career. While *Texas Chain Saw* was a financial and creative juggernaut, drawing a great deal of attention to Hooper, the film's gritty, realist aesthetic served as both entrée into Hollywood and a somewhat cursed calling card. The film holds a special place in the Museum of Modern Art's collection and solidified Hooper's role as a "master of horror," yet Hooper's desire to move beyond its sordid reputation (as well as the horror genre) never really came to fruition. The three films that Hooper made for Cannon—*Lifeorce* (1985), *Invaders from Mars*, and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (both 1986)—were renamed or recut by the studio or its producers. As Robert Englund, who is known primarily for portraying Freddy Krueger but also starred in Hooper's second feature, *Eaten Alive*,² bluntly explains, "I love Tobe—I just wish people would leave Tobe's films alone. You hire Tobe Hooper, you want to get Tobe Hooper. You don't want to shit on his creativity" (quoted in Muir [2002] 2015, 47).

The controversy surrounding *Poltergeist* (1982) is especially important when considering Hooper's Hollywood journey and legacy. As John Bloom (2004) explains in *Texas Monthly*:

On a particular day when a *Los Angeles Times* reporter visited the set, Spielberg was shooting second-unit work in front of the house while Hooper was in the backyard getting a scene in which a tree comes to life in a little girl's dreams. The following week an article appeared in the *Times* implying that Hooper was not really directing *Poltergeist* and that Spielberg was not just the executive producer but was ghost-directing. The clear implication was that Hooper was not up to the job. When the movie came out, review after review took note of the rumor that Hooper hadn't directed at all.

To this day Hooper's face falls if you ask him about it.³

Following Hooper's death, in 2017, critics and horror sites reinvigorated the controversy by picking apart his rocky Hollywood career. Brad Miska (2017), in

an article titled “Tobe Hooper Pretended to Direct *Poltergeist* for Steven Spielberg!,” acknowledges that this rumor is “a huge knock against his legacy. If it’s not true, it’s an awful and horribly insulting rumor that continues to infect the director’s reputation.” The topic is explored in great detail in the “Who REALLY directed “Poltergeist?” section of the *Poltergeist* fan site, where claims focus on, among other things, Hooper’s cocaine use, Spielberg’s narcissism, and the producers’ leaking the idea that Spielberg directed in order to capitalize on his reputation and brand name.⁴ Despite the truth or falsity of any of the rumors, the twisted Hollywood politics behind *Poltergeist*’s authorship undoubtedly affected Hooper deeply. As the director Tom Holland points out in an interview for *Dread Central*, “He hated Spielberg . . . he hated what had happened with *Poltergeist*. All his life he avoided saying anything negative about Spielberg because he was afraid of him, because he wanted to work again” (Decker 2018).

The controversy encircling *Poltergeist*’s authorship, combined with constant battles with producers and production companies regarding financing and final cuts, left its mark on Hooper’s view of Hollywood. Ironically, *Toolbox Murders* comes with its own series of rumors regarding the film’s struggles. One reviewer at Horror Digital noted, “Angela Bettis told my business partner at a show recently that the film was, she thought, still unfinished and that the ending was a result of running out of money” (ScarredGod 2004). IMDb, under the “trivia” heading for *Toolbox Murders*, elaborates:

One of the production companies financing the film dissolved during filming, forcing Tobe Hooper to shut down production with only ⅔ of the movie actually shot. Numerous continuity errors, plot holes, and narrative flaws are the result of Hooper hastily editing together what he had filmed into a complete movie in order to try and recoup financial losses and so that the actors’ and crews’ work wouldn’t go to waste. In the commentary track for this film with Tobe Hooper and the writers, they state that this did not happen.

Indeed, on the commentary track for the special edition DVD (2005), Hooper and the film’s writers, Jace Anderson and Adam Gierasch, deliberately debunk this rumor. Hooper states that the rumor is “totally wrong. We shot everything!” He hints several times that the film was shot very quickly and that they had little time, but Anderson insists, “It was low budget, but we shot it all” (Anderson, Gierasch, and Hooper 2005). While those involved disagree on what actually happened, the rumors feel like another nail in Hooper’s career coffin, one that would further color his view of Hollywood’s dream factory.

This ambivalence manifests in Hooper's representation of his two primary characters: the supernatural killer Coffin Baby and his unwitting nemesis, the Gothic heroine Nell.

FINAL GIRLS, HAUNTED HEROINES, AND THE OCCULT

On the surface, Nell might seem to embody Carol Clover's idea of the Final Girl, the one surviving female figure whose paranoia makes her sensitive to the danger surrounding her, thus enabling her to triumph in the end, usually by turning the killer's murderous tools against him (Clover 2015, 82–83). While an awkward tension hovers over Nell and her place as a point of identification for the audience, her restricted perspective contributes to a near-constant narrative gaslighting. Yet at times, the film's moments of unrestricted narration indicate that her paranoia is justified and that a masked killer is murdering Lusman dwellers and playing with their corpses in his secret lair.

Nell is a "haunted heroine," a woman touched by trauma to the point that the line between dream and reality, sleeping and waking, is hopelessly blurred. Shortly after Nell discovers a keepsake box of human teeth hidden inside her wall, she sees a vision of her father lying in a casket. As she slowly approaches him, he suddenly animates, grabbing her hand. Following this jump scare, viewers quickly discover that this imagery comes from a dream, raising concerns about Nell's reliability as a point of identification for the audience. These moments of troubled subjectivity link *Toolbox Murders* with the slasher's supernaturally charged villain, one that, Jessica Balanzategui explains, "has the power to invade the subjectivities of other characters, rendering this figure a monstrous multiplicity who looms over the film's entire diegetic world rather than a solitary human stalker, even as he continues to function as such in key sequences" (2015, 164). Nell's loss of her father three months earlier makes her vulnerable to occult forces, and her fresh experience of trauma leaves her open to the killer's influence; Coffin Baby penetrates Nell's subjectivity, enabled by her growing curiosity and obsession regarding his home, the Lusman Arms.

The dusty, hidden box of pulled teeth provokes a remarkable shift in the film's narrative trajectory, steering sharply away from slasher tropes toward an investigative, Gothic journey as Nell becomes entranced by the Lusman's unique architectural flourishes and disorienting layout. Like so many horror films that contain both haunted houses and heroines, *Toolbox Murders* incorporates the Gothic Bluebeard trope, in which the film's female protagonist is both heralded and punished for her persistent curiosity about the uncanny realities of her situation. Nell's active gaze is, as Mary Ann Doane points out



Figure 13.2. Nell (Angela Bettis) uncovering the Lusman's occult markings in *Toolbox Murders* (Tobe Hooper, Lionsgate Films, 2005).

in her work on female spectatorship and the paranoid women's film of the forties, simultaneous with her own victimization (Doane 1987, 136). The more Nell takes an interest in the Lusman Arms, the more she becomes enmeshed in the killer's physical and psychological terrain, simultaneously manifesting an almost intimate connection with the killer and ultimately becoming his most elusive target.

The film's, and Nell's, shifted focus to the uncovering of the Lusman's secrets produces both a satisfying narrative trajectory for its chief protagonist and some of the film's most vivid set pieces. Hooper hints at the building's occult underpinnings during Daisy's approach in the film's opening, the camera focusing on strange symbols carved into the paving tiles; he later uses significant gaze-object-gaze cutting to emphasize Nell's attention being drawn to similar occult symbols decorating the walls and hallways she traverses (e.g., fig. 13.2). *Toolbox* provides tidbits of the Lusman Arms' history through the veteran actor Rance Howard's character, Chaz—a denizen of the hotel since 1947 and a Hollywood contract player during that time. In an early conversation, when Chaz asks whether Nell and her husband are actors, she cries, "No!" explicitly emphasizing that she is not chasing stardom. Chaz responds, "Seen too many pretty ones move here and get their hearts broken," implying that he knows more than he is letting on. Indeed, he does, and as Nell becomes increasingly curious about her new home, Chaz gradually reveals the building's, and the killer's, secrets.

At their initial encounter in the laundry room, deep within the bowels of the building, he regales Nell with tales of the Lusman's luxurious past as a home and playground for the elite of Hollywood, a place where Jack Lusman, the building's architect and owner, was able to spend time with people who "shared his proclivities." During this conversation, and one shortly following, Chaz gives Nell cryptic clues regarding the dilapidated hotel, pointing her to Jack Lusman's mysterious disappearance and telling her, "Shh . . . the walls listen." This hint about the killer's hiding place compels Nell to investigate further, as does the realization that each floor is missing any room that is marked by 04 (e.g., 304, 404, or 504). Her journey through the building's dark and rundown hallways, with patches of wallpaper peeling off the walls, provides Nell with the most agency that she experiences within this grimy and foreign diegesis.

After Nell discovers that room 504 does not exist—neither on the fifth floor, nor on the copy of the building's floor plan held at the Los Angeles Preservation Society—she follows the occult symbols etched into the walls and tiles, which she has written with a Sharpie on both of her arms, leading her to discover a secret townhouse hidden in its depths. Her investigation of these symbols leads her to the building's top floor, where she finds more magical imagery and a door leading to a solitary rocking chair perched on the Lusman Arms' roof—a lonely spot where one imagines the killer sitting, looking down on Hollywood from above. The building's sorry state causes Nell to fall through a weak spot in the roof, only to find a secret doorway leading to a narrow staircase within the walls of the building. Here, *Toolbox Murders* functions in classic paranoid-Gothic fashion, which, according to Doane, condenses affect "onto the image of a woman investigating, penetrating space alone." "And it is the staircase," she adds, "a signifier which possesses a certain semantic privilege in relation to the woman as object of the gaze, which articulates the connection between the familiar and the unfamiliar" (Doane 1987, 135). This narrow, twisted staircase highlights Nell's blurry confusion regarding notions of inside and outside, exterior and interior. It branches off into dozens of labyrinthine passages, where Nell soon encounters both the masked Coffin Baby and the victims that he has scattered around his environs.

With Nell's entry into the killer's world, the film once again takes a sharp turn, refocusing on its masked killer. His kills at long last come to the attention of the other tenants—Luis, Byron, Austin (a teenager who accidentally records Julia's murder on a spycam he set up in her apartment), and Nell's husband, Steven—who finally believe Nell's fears and enter the killer's lair to search for her. Accordingly, *Toolbox Murders* repositions Nell as a victim of the masked killer, one who generically now requires saving; yet the film keeps intact her special connection with the killer in order to fuel their final confrontation at film's end.

Steven finds Nell only after Luis and Byron have been gruesomely dispatched in two of the most darkly humorous kills in *Toolbox Murders*. The killer snatches Luis from a branching corridor off the secret staircase and straps him to a table with his head placed in a vice. He then showers the poor door attendant with powdered lye, his skin dissolving into the deathly grimace of a gore-covered corpse. In this scene, Coffin Baby literally giggles with glee, performing a happy dance that comes as a sick surprise for spectators. Shortly after, the killer grabs Byron, plunges a pair of giant bolt cutters into his back, grabs his spine, and whirls him around like a puppet. His own secret space now invaded, the killer no longer distinguishes between Hollywood hopefuls and the building's other tenants and attacks anyone and everyone who trespasses into his private den.

Within this dreadful and grotesque space, Nell's and Coffin Baby's stories finally collide, their shared connection with death and loss drawing them together as much as the building does. Yet Coffin Baby's origin story and his relationship to the occult symbols carved into Lusman Arms' façade are only cryptically explained, ambiguously tying the two characters to the building in rather unclear ways. Once Nell and Steven escape the killer's clutches, they encounter Chaz lurking in one of its dark corners, determined to help them get away. Chaz tells them Coffin Baby's origin story, and that "separation between life and death is not the same for him," because he was born fighting his way out of his mother's womb. While she lay in her casket, the mourners heard his cries and pulled him out. This narrative dynamically intersects with Nell's research into the meaning behind the building's occult imagery. Nell has figured out that these deliberately configured symbols, designed by Jack Lusman, cast a crafted spell on the building as a whole, and that this spell "keeps him alive." The "him" to which Nell refers suggests that Lusman performed a magical working in order to achieve immortality, and that Jack Lusman is actually Coffin Baby protecting his hidden occult world from the ravages of renovation. Chaz informs Nell that "he" knows that Chaz told Nell about room 504 (suggesting the killer's supernatural omniscience via the building's "listening" walls), and when she asks why Chaz divulged this info, he replies, "I knew you were the one who was meant to find it." This conversation makes explicit the connection between Nell and the killer, asserting that only Nell can stop Coffin Baby from continuing his reign of terror over the Lusman Arms. Unlike the female slasher hero, whose link with the killer stems primarily from his psychosexual desire and, following Clover, their shared gender confusion, Nell, as a haunted heroine, is subjectively and empathically linked with him through her recent encounters with death, her outsider status, and their mutual respect for the occult (Clover 2015,

77–79). Her arms, covered with the symbols that animate Coffin Baby, confuse and bewilder him when she throws them up in desperate defense. With the killer momentarily stunned by Nell's appropriation of his own occult energy, Nell saves herself and flees the building for good.

TOOLBOX MURDERS, OCCULT LOS ANGELES, AND THE URBAN WYRD

Whatever tensions arise in its hybrid shifting between slasher film and Gothic woman's film, *Toolbox Murders* coheres around its looming setting, the Lusman Arms. This run-down luxury hotel, standing since the twenties, is an icon of Hollywood history both diegetically and nondiegetically. The film was shot at Los Angeles's Ambassador Hotel, the site of the renowned Cocoanut Grove nightclub and the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy on June 5, 1968. Hooper's film expertly combines the history of Los Angeles, especially its occult history, with a fictionalized origin story that motivates the entire second half of the film. Tenants and the building's landlord constantly comment on the building's rich history, mostly as a deflection from its current decrepit status. The catalyst for the recent string of murders and deaths is the building's contemporary renovation, as if the building were clinging desperately to its past.

Toolbox Murders' representation of the Lusman Arms and the horrific world hidden behind the building's walls provides a distinctive example of what the folk horror scholar Adam Scovell defines as the "urban wyrd." As Scovell explains, "Urban Wyrd is a form that taps into the undercurrent of the city. In a similar way to psychogeography, it can find new narratives hidden below the top-layer; of dark skullduggery and strangeness beyond the reasonable confines of what we consider part of city life. It can be haunting, sleazy, unnerving, disturbing, horrifying but, above all, it is still recognizable, *still known*" (2019, 11–12). Karl Bell's exploration of the urban wyrd emphasizes its uncanny qualities: "[It] is often at its most disturbing in the fantastical-is-already-here-mode. A Weirder affect can accompany the discovery of what [John] Clute calls wainscot societies—the revealing of previously unknown communities living behind, beneath or within the walls and buildings of our cities. Here the weird does not arrive from the 'outside'; rather it is located in the awakening to what was there all along" (Bell 2019, 47; original citations omitted). The Lusman Arms' impending rejuvenation spurs its creator, who resides "behind, beneath, and within," to rise again to preserve the hotel's and his own immortality.

The film's script, mise-en-scène, and cinematography purposefully refer to Hollywood's occult history, not only through the symbols embedded in the walls, floors, and hallways of the Lusman Arms, but also through its origin

story, which parallels notorious occult histories linked with the area. Bell contends of the urban wyrd: “[It] is not a fixed place, not intrinsically, spatially located or constant; it does not work like the ancient notion of *genius loci*, the spirit of place. Rather it is relational, an alchemical response created in the interplay between environment, imagination, phobias, the confounding of our expectations and the uncertainties that it breeds” (2019, 46). This relational aspect intersects with Hooper’s troubled encounters with the Hollywood system, mirroring his ambivalent attitude toward Los Angeles and the city’s hold over him. Some of the dark tales attached to Los Angeles no doubt entranced Hooper, having arrived fresh and eager from Texas. To a newcomer from afar, Hollywood could appear mysterious, riddled with dark forces that might make or break a person’s career in the image industries. In the Lusman Arms, *Toolbox* reconfigures a history of Hollywood true crime into a single structure.

Shortly after Nell and Steven’s arrival, and as a way to excuse some of the building’s obvious quirks, the Lusman Arms’ manager, Byron, informs the couple that he lives a floor below and that Elizabeth Short, also known as the Black Dahlia, used to reside in his apartment. While the Black Dahlia’s murder remains officially unsolved, it has become a frequently represented part of Hollywood lore, especially because Short was known to have dreams of becoming a star. Contemporary true-crime explorations have linked the death of Short with avant-garde art and culture, especially the midcentury works of Salvador Dalí and Man Ray, whose grotesque and doll-like representations of women were much admired by the physician and art lover George Hodel, who possessed a substantial collection of their works. Steven Hodel (2006), a former police detective, has credibly accused his father of Short’s murder and the murder of other young women in a similar fashion. The ritualistic character of the murders hints at occult gatherings and female human sacrifice. Patty Jenkins’s limited series *I Am the Night* (2019; TNT) explores these types of connections through the lens of Fauna Hodel, Tamar Hodel’s daughter, allegedly born of incestuous relations with her doctor father.

Once Nell begins to be caught up in the Lusman Arms’ unsettling atmosphere, she learns a more substantial story from an eager clerk at the Los Angeles Preservation Society, who, upon hearing that she lives in the place, asks, “You wanna know about the symbols, right?” He proceeds to enthusiastically shower her with salacious tales of the building’s origin, telling her that Lusman hung out with black magic hipsters that were part of a lunar cult named after “an aerospace pioneer who tried to fuse science and magic.” This pioneering engineer was the actual rocket scientist Jack Parsons.

Looking deeper into Jack Parsons is akin to falling down a fascinating occult

rabbit hole, especially considering all the media attention he has received in recent years. Parsons was the focus of the season 2 finale of Amazon's *Lore*, was one of the "Dangerous Minds" in a *Drunk History* episode (both 2018), and was the center of CBS All Access's series *Strange Angel*, based on the biography of Parsons by George Pendle (2005). Born in Los Angeles in 1914, Parsons was one of the founders of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (a division of NASA) and the Aerojet Engineering Corporation, and was a chief inventor of rocket engines and fuel at a time (in the 1940s) when rockets and space travel were considered science fiction. Parsons' love of sci-fi developed into a passion for magic, and in 1941 he and his wife, Helen, joined Thelema, the English occultist Aleister Crowley's new religious movement. He became the leader of the Agape Lodge, LA's Thelema outpost, in 1942. In 1944, he was summarily expelled from JPL and Aerojet for his involvement in Thelema, then headquartered at his mansion in Pasadena, known as "The Parsonage." His home developed quite a reputation for the sex magick he performed there, and he attracted a variety of free-spirited guests, including the science-fiction author L. Ron Hubbard. He and Hubbard were heavily intertwined in what is known as the "Babalon Working," an occult ritual that involved Parsons and Hubbard masturbating and ejaculating repeatedly over a series of magical tablets etched with occult runes. Parsons lost his life savings after investing in a fraudulent company with Hubbard and ended up rigging explosives for Hollywood films. He died in an explosion in his garage in 1952, and several theories about the cause—accident, suicide, murder—continue to shroud his death in mystery. *Toolbox Murders'* inclusion of these pieces of Los Angeles lore speaks not only to the occult history of the area, but also to Hooper's connection with a place that stalled his burgeoning directorial career rather than facilitating his success and growth.

Toolbox Murders stands out as a highlight of Tobe Hooper's late career. Its creative kills and murder set pieces are masterly in their combination of shock, gore, and dark humor. Yet the film's exploration of the dark side of Hollywood aspirations, manifested in the Lusman Arms' labyrinthine spaces hidden behind its walls, indicates Hooper's remarkable prescience in creating a film that delves into a sordid world coexisting with Hollywood's glamorous reputation and shimmering façade. One wonders whether Hooper's career might have flourished again had he lived to take advantage of the opportunities offered by today's streaming services, which provide workable budgets for horror films and host groundbreaking anthology series. Instead, despite all his attempts to rise above it, he could never extricate himself from the weight of Hollywood's curse on his reputation.

NOTES

1. In a November 3, 1975, letter to Kim Henkel and Hooper from the Lucy Kroll Agency, Kroll mentions waiting to hear from Friedkin about his suggestion.
2. Englund was a Hooper regular, starring in Hooper's television episode "No More Mr. Nice Guy" (1988) for the series *Freddy's Nightmares* as well as in *Night Terrors* (1993) and *The Mangler* (1995).
3. Bloom is in error about the scene that Hooper was shooting. It is not a dream sequence, but instead involves a tree coming supernaturally to life during a thunderstorm and attempting to devour young Robbie Freeling.
4. *Poltergeist*: The Fan Site, poltergeist.poltergeistiii.com/really.html.

SONGS IN THE KEY OF DEATH

Tobe Hooper's "Dancing with Myself" and "Dance of the Dead"

JERRY D. METZ JR.

It's people that I'm afraid of.

TOBE HOOPER, IN AN INTERVIEW FOR *THE AMERICAN NIGHTMARE* (2003)

THE SCREENWRITER RICHARD CHRISTIAN "R. C." Matheson (son of the short-story author Richard Matheson), who wrote the "Dance of the Dead" episode for the *Masters of Horror* series, praised Tobe Hooper's artistic range: "If you look at *Dance*, and you look at *Texas Chain Saw*, and you look at *Poltergeist*, you've got a very wide bandwidth there." He noted that the revised *Dance* screenplay "just borders on being out of control, and it needs to be in the hands of somebody that really knows how to do that, and that's Tobe" (Woodward 2005). This essay in appreciation of Hooper intends to bolster that view of the director's "wide bandwidth" by considering "Dance of the Dead" (2005) alongside one of Hooper's less recognized works: his 1983 MTV video for the postpunk pop rocker Billy Idol's "Dancing with Myself."

These two projects present highly divergent work settings and creative scenarios. They also represent different eras in Hooper's career and in the history of cable television. But their juxtaposition demonstrates continuities as well: Hooper's artistic flexibility as well as some of his recurring interests. Both contain metatextual elements and hint at Hooper's abiding fascination with the film *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931) and classic horror generally. While both depict human undead in postapocalyptic settings, and "Dance of the Dead" also contains a lot of music—Hooper said, "It's kind of a dark opera" (DVD commentary)—"Dance" exposes the fragility of a world in which the luxury of "music video" is even possible. Consumerism, celebrity, entertainment, and specularity are lent new meaning in its atmosphere of brutality and hopelessness.

"DANCING WITH MYSELF"

I hate to be told what I'm seeing, so I let the piece speak for itself.

TOBE HOOPER (DIRECTOR'S COMMENTARY, "DANCE OF THE DEAD")

One of music video's distinctive features is its open-ended quality . . . its fashioning of an alternative world where image is reality.

PAT AUFDERHEIDE (1987)

Hooper was the first film director to direct a music video. The trade magazine *Billboard* reported the fact at the time (Zuckerman 1983), though later it erroneously gave primacy to John Landis for Michael Jackson's "Thriller" (Ben-Yehuda 2009). The extravagance of Landis's "Thriller"—the video and its star were long at the center of controversy and media spectacles—has overshadowed Hooper's pioneering contribution, although it was noted by John Kenneth Muir ([2002] 2015, 28).¹ The August 20, 1983, *Billboard* article specifies that Hooper's video was "to be released this week"; "Thriller" began filming in October 1983 and debuted on MTV on December 2 after limited public cinematic release (Hebblethwaite 2013). Hooper's musical zombies thus pre-dated, and may have influenced, those in "Thriller" and other period videos. Still, it is a testament to the place of horror film in popular culture at the time that Hooper and Landis were both recruited for the new genre of music television.

Idol did not enjoy the commercial stature that Jackson did in 1983 (few artists could have), but he was hardly obscure. He had enjoyed regional success with his band Generation X in the British punk and new-wave scene, and was represented by Bill Aucoin, manager of the American arena rockers KISS. Following the suggestion of Idol's label, Chrysalis, he moved to New York City in 1981 to start over as a solo artist, and he had generated one album and the video for "White Wedding" (1982) in the United States by the time he worked with Hooper (Idol 2014; Green 1982, 13). MTV, launched in August 1981, was by 1983 expanding its reach into several major urban markets, so the timing was propitious. Chrysalis budgeted \$70,000 for Idol's video (Zuckerman 1983): a substantial investment, since most videos at the time cost \$20,000–\$40,000, and \$50,000 was at the top end of "standard" budgets by 1984. By contrast, "Thriller" had a budget of \$500,000 and wound up costing nearly twice as much (Fangoria 1984). But Chrysalis was betting big on Hooper as part of its "global game plan" to break Idol out (Robertshaw 1983).

In 1983, the music magazine *RockBill* suggested that Chrysalis had selected Hooper as part of a strategy to rework Idol's image from new-wave exotica to a

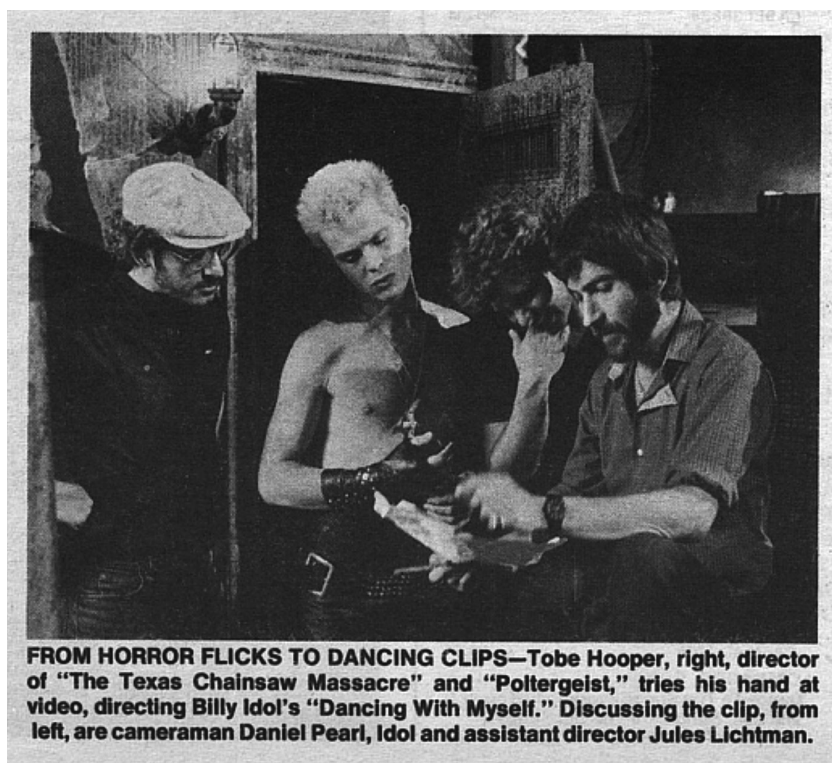


Figure 14.1. From left: Daniel Pearl, Billy Idol, Jules Lichtman, and Tobe Hooper on the set of the video for “Dancing with Myself.” Photo credit: *Billboard*, August 20, 1983, 30.

sterner, rock-friendly look (Sloan 1983). But in his memoir, Idol writes that the idea was his, noting that during a drug binge on a US-Canada tour in late 1982, he watched *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* “over and over, which gave me an idea for a future music video director” (Idol 2014, 175). In a recent interview, Daniel Pearl, *Chain Saw*’s cinematographer, corroborates Idol’s claim and states that, through connections, he became the middleman between Chrysalis and Hooper; Pearl worked with Hooper on Idol’s video (Pearl 2018; see fig. 14.1). Having a prestigious horror-film director make Idol’s video might be the perfect way to accomplish his style change, given the association of hard-edged rock music with ominous visuals from 1970s pioneers Black Sabbath through 1980s acts such as Iron Maiden, Mötley Crüe, and W.A.S.P.

Hooper’s latitude encompassed designing the shirt that Idol wore, which the singer described as a “skeletal top [that] was unlike anything I had ever worn in my stage show” (Idol 2014, 178). The principal constraint was MTV censorship codes: “We had to hold back on some of the horror elements, and [could] only vaguely suggest the corruption in the world” (178). “Dancing with Myself” might have turned out differently: before Hooper was contracted, one

concept involved making the world's first 3-D music video, with glasses to be sold at 7-11 stores (Pearl 2018); another featured a gigantic pinball table for a set, with the project to be financed largely by Coca-Cola and displaying ample product placement of the soda (Idol 2014, 178).

It is common to hear that with MTV, the starkest example of television as "illustrated radio" (Chion [1990] 1994, 157), everything on the channel was advertising.² But a 1984 *Variety* interview with several prominent MTV directors highlighted that while being commercial, "the form is still an artistic medium" that should sell itself by adding ambiguity, contrast, or other visually distinct elements to make each video interesting and able to hold up to repeated viewings (*Variety* 1984, 88). Working with his sense of these parameters, Hooper succeeded in developing a compelling, "macabre if eye catching [*sic*]" (Sloan 1983, 12) video that does not simply sell the song, but also extends its potential for meaning by contributing semiautonomous interpretive context through the visual dimension.

The video is replete with Hooper signatures: gliding camerawork, rich shadows, color contrasts, and deep palettes of red and black. It opens with a sweeping close-up on the singer, which analysts of music video note is basic to the medium's drive to create celebrities and star texts (Goodwin 1992), but which also reflects Hooper's focus on the song's lyrics. These lyrics seem to foreground the narrator's existential loneliness, which prevented Hooper from simply replicating two of the era's most common video types: the overtly metatextual, "this band is making a video!" video, featuring shots of bands interacting with sets, monitors, and camera operators (Kaplan 1987, 34–36); or the "authentic performance" video, showing the whole band pretending, without visible video infrastructure, to generate the prerecorded audio track. Structurally, the video comes closest to an "illustrative narrative," showing the audience, through first Idol's and then the zombies' energetic dancing, the effect the music is intended to have on them (Goodwin 1992, 86–87). Idol logically needed to be depicted alone. As he recalls the song's origins: "While playing in Tokyo on tour, [Generation X] had gone to a couple of discos, where the kids were still in *Saturday Night Fever* mode, dancing with their own reflections in the mirror. We started to work on some lyrics, detailing a night on any club floor in the world, where a lonely dancer fills the mirror with his or her own sensual movements. We made the song all about the longing to find a partner in this life" (Idol 2014, 117–118). The "longing to find a partner" may have suggested *Frankenstein*; certainly, the iconography of the Universal monster (and the dangerous capacities of electricity) was central to Hooper's recent film *The Funhouse* (1981). The singer's narrative positioning, like the monster's, is forlorn, alone and lonely in the song text: "Your empty eyes seem to pass me by / And leave me dancing with myself."

The song was written before MTV debuted, but Hooper's conception of a

zombie audience recasts its lyric as a sort of plea to the distracted television viewer to stay watching the video (while inevitably recalling Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*). If Hooper offers a connection between Idol and *Frankenstein*, he clearly casts the indifferent, un-human dancers as monsters, having them surge menacingly. Visually, Hooper does not necessarily contest Idol's explicated emotional perspective but, parallel to it, opens additional areas of meaning by representing the dancers as zombies with "empty eyes" that Idol can control with blasts of electricity. This move balances the forlorn narrator position of the song with the larger media text of Idol as a powerful celebrity. The vision of Idol as an object of desire is initiated in early shots of zombies pouring out of garbage cans and rushing toward his lean, muscled form, and then refined once Idol has disciplined the hordes with blasts of electrical power (including his music) and they dance in a more unified, choreographed, nonthreatening manner. This scenario allowed Hooper to present an artist who might not be familiar to American audiences as "already popular" (Goodwin 1992, 95–96), even if it portrayed Idol's fan-consumers ironically as zombies. Idol states that he and his then girlfriend had gone to a nearby club to select the best street-level dancers "to appear as zombies in the video" (Idol 2014, 178): an authentic element absent in *Thriller*, for which Landis hired professional dancers, but an approach to capturing urban reality that Hooper would use again in "Dance of the Dead."

Hooper took advantage of the track's brief sixteen-bar instrumental section to further show Idol's strength over the zombies, using symbolism rooted in traditional Western music. As Idol helms the electrical equipment, guitars play repetitive ascending figures (toward hope, the heavens) while zombies tumble down on-screen (toward death, hell); the simultaneous rising and falling across sensory dimensions enhances the impression of distance between Idol and the zombies. But Idol's magnetism provides resolution: once his voice reenters, the zombies crawl back up to his level to shimmy deferentially. Their new coherence conveys a message: one video scholar observes that "figures dancing as one unit grants more autonomy to the music; it raises the question of whether the music or the characters have volition, and when the figures begin to look like automatons, the music can seem to take over" (Vernallis 2004, 71). Hooper's intent here was very likely to serve the music.

Yet Hooper also suggests that Idol not merely controls the zombies but also created them. He transforms the chorus lyric "If I had the chance I'd ask the world to dance / And I'd be dancing with myself" from a prediction of rejection to a declaration of choice and power—an interpretation bolstered by the *Frankenstein*-like equipment that Idol uses to control the zombies. The composite audio and visual Idol is no longer merely the victim of forces of alienation but also their monstrous agent—and the zombies' former humanity

and present victimhood is also reinsinuated. Hooper's flair for social critique and radical incoherence is familiar here, though toned down for the all-ages medium. Two of the three added vignettes imply discord in both domestic and political spheres: a man prepares to slaughter his wife while children play, and the chained woman, facing a knife, stands in for a 1960s anti-Soviet comic superheroine named Octobriana;³ the third, with blindly jabbering figurines (a clown-faced automaton—a souvenir from *The Funhouse*—and a wizened form recalling *Chain Saw's* Grandpa), seems to mock the entire endeavor. The video's setting on an exploded planet, its undead, and its weaponized electricity all underscore Hooper's winking subversion of period MTV space-age advertising linking MTV with the progress of the moon landing: in those ads' discourse, "MTV equals the men exploring outer space in the breaking of new territory, and also equals new technologies, the future" (Kaplan 1987, 18). Hooper's view of the future and the destination of this "progress" is less optimistic. As the song fades, the camerawork evokes *Frankenstein's* climactic medium-then-long shot of the burning mill. (Here the individual and the mob can both be victorious, through celebrating Idol's music.) Hooper understood that the video needed to end in a conventionally optimistic way, but Idol's star power remains ambivalently both creative and destructive. Re-creating the shot grounds Hooper's video in the history of German expressionism at the foundation of horror cinema. Evoking this classic mob scene also hints obliquely at the tenuousness of fame; Pearl mentioned that when he approached Hooper about the video, Hooper was brooding over the popular erasure of his name as the director of *Poltergeist* (Pearl 2018).

"DANCE OF THE DEAD"

It's all about reality for me. . . . I want to make it difficult to watch.

TOBE HOOPER (HOOPER 2005B)

If there was no future, what we decided to do now really counted.

BILLY IDOL (IDOL 2014, 130)

We've got to watch the end of the show.

JAK (CHARACTER IN "DANCE OF THE DEAD")

Scholars debate the extent to which the world of music video embodies a manner of postmodernism that strips it of past and future—that it exists in a continually unfolding present.⁴ But the people in Hooper's epically bleak Masters

of Horror episode "Dance of the Dead" (November 11, 2005) seem largely to live that way. The past has been circumscribed, redefined by a months-long war that saw many soldiers die, including the heroine Peggy's father, and civilian populations ravaged by clouds of acidic "blizz," or Blizzard—its effects rendered with the jerky bleariness of an old-fashioned hand-cranked camera. At young Peggy's festive birthday party, bright hues in Kodachrome are burned out to drab, washed-out color schemes of brown and grey as the present reemerges from a flashback of an attack. Nothing before this event seems to matter anymore, and no one evinces faith in the future. Society has coarsened, become numb to suffering.

"Dance" combines a morality tale and a science-fiction dystopian future scenario, ostensibly on a planetary scale. Elements of the Gothic include a dark family secret and, more broadly, Gothic's concern with science, technology, and the "disruption of accepted notions of the human," which the novel *Frankenstein* heralded (Punter and Byron 2004, 21). Hooper's (2005a) DVD commentary stresses the importance of *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) for the texture of personal interactions he sought, particularly between the two alienated characters Jak and Boxx, but another insight comes in a passing mention he makes of a western: the world he created is "on the other side of *How the West was Won*" (John Ford, Henry Hathaway, and George Marshall, 1962). The aim of building something larger or better than the present no longer inspires. Progress, conquering, consolidation—all are spent, failed values. The middle-class educated audience for the "dance of the dead" in Matheson's original story is here peopled with sadomasochistic nihilists; margins have moved to the center.

A decade or so after the opening birthday-party attack, Peggy's older sister has disappeared. Timid Peggy and her overprotective mother run a restaurant that is visited by Jak, Boxx, and their girlfriends. Peggy senses a connection with Jak, who arranges to meet her later. He takes her to the violent outlying town of Muskeet and the Doom Room, a decadent nightclub lorded over by a ghoulish MC (longtime Hooper collaborator Robert Englund). The club's featured attraction is the "loopy dance"; the LUPs, or lifeless undead phenomena, are dead women—drug addicts, society's outcasts—reanimated by a mixture of fresh blood and "mussle-tussle," a chemical devised by the military that enables dead soldiers to rise and fight longer. It turns out that Jak and Boxx work for the MC, stealing people's blood. The "dance" consists of the staggering, erratic movements of the corpses onstage before the leering crowd; assistants heighten the frenzy with cattle prods. (Matheson in his remarks on the DVD commentary points out that the cattle prods were Hooper's idea.) Peggy's mother goes to the club to find her. A grim family reunion ensues when Peggy recognizes

one of the LUPs as her sister Anna. It is revealed that Anna, a club regular, overdosed and was sold to the MC by her mother. Peggy, aided by Jak, demands the body for burial, and trades her mother to the MC to get it. Finally, Peggy is literally “at home” in the club, too, her appearance transformed to punk, matching the rest of the crowd, smiling impassively as her mother writhes onstage.

It would not be surprising if post-9/11 sensitivities had led Hooper to this story. The original story, written in 1952, during the Korean War, was a product of wartime awareness; the reanimating chemical was devised during a future World War III. And significantly, whereas Matheson put World War III more than forty years in the future, in 1997, Hooper’s war was just around the corner, in the late 2000s. A newscast is heard reporting that over nine million have been killed in the United States and that seven major cities, including New York and Los Angeles, have been crippled. Hooper said, “I thought, my God, this could really happen, like in a year or two. Or in a month. I think it’s all very sad and terrible. It isn’t very optimistic, but neither is turning on the news in the morning” (2005b).

Yet Hooper’s real project was not a standard post-9/11 depiction of paranoia or vulnerability stemming from a foreign threat to the homeland, although that is an important context. Neither was it overtly political, although state institutions in the episode are so hollow as to be absent. Rather, he meditates here on average people and their nihilistic instincts and potential for everyday depravity, which a war or other extreme event can unleash in a society with weak foundations. Personal relations shown on-screen are mostly volatile and transactional, and the local news out of Muskeet includes fifty-seven murders and eighty rapes in one week. Police are overwhelmed (the only officers seen are dead ones getting picked over by a scavenger), and Peggy’s mother grimly calls for burning Muskeet to the ground. To the extent that violence is understood by characters to be an acceptable solution to problems, the episode reflects what Matt Becker (2006) has called the “political ambivalence” or “political disengagement” of the 1970s “hippie horror” films made by George Romero, Wes Craven, and Hooper—a simultaneously radical, reactionary, and despairing position expressed in ultraviolence.

The brutality linked with anger and hopelessness, the sense that meaning has been decimated, aligns “Dance” aesthetically and philosophically with *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). In that film, the watch with a nail driven into it, dangling outside the Terrible House, is commonly seen as an attempt to stop time, to hold back the progress that rendered the family obsolete (Rose 2013, 52). But Gunnar Hansen (citing Worland 2007) notes that Hooper was referring to Salvador Dalí’s 1931 painting *The Persistence of Memory* (Hansen 2013, 59), a leading interpretation of which involves the relativity of space and time

and the ensuing collapse of conventional categories of perception and meaning. *Chain Saw* conveyed that ambiguity to audiences viscerally, while "Dance" is a more straightforward narrative, but the instability of the lived world it depicts, of its structures and alliances, reaches a similarly radical peak.

Another continuity with *Chain Saw*, and with *The Mangler* (1995) and *Mortuary* (2005), is the inescapable, deterministic force of capitalism. Everyone needs money, and no one has enough: Anna's mother sold her so that she could support the "good" daughter ("When Daddy died, we had nothing," she cries), but still their restaurant is barely getting by. Jak and Boxx steal and sell blood to support their numbing habits. Hooper pulls back the curtain on "show business" when Peggy demands of the MC (referred to as "Joel Grey from Hell, circa *Cabaret*" by Englund [quoted in Ferrante 2006, 68]) what her sister is doing at the club; he replies: "Not much. She's dead. In a freezer all day, brrrrr! I take her out, I shoot her up, she dances a little, I sell some tickets, I pay the rent." The performance has no greater meaning for the MC than to fill his pocket. Consumption is deromanticized, base and sordid, its promised pleasures illusory. At one juncture, the MC thunders to the audience awaiting the LUP dance, "Is it obscene? Or is it science? Poetry or pornography? You'll have to be the judge"—a decadent reprise of *Frankenstein*'s iconoclastic introductory warning to moviegoers.

The dynamic between cinematic art and "live" reality is a central tension. Hooper refers to the episode as a "film," and it contains over 1,100 edits. Flashbacks, camera movements and positioning, the stuttering hand-cranked camera, all instances of visual flourish for their own sake, present the story with stylistic verve—and, perhaps not incidentally, re-create a music-video aesthetic. The metatextual note of the popular "entertainment" being temporarily reanimated dead forms, with which the MC sexually engages, can hardly go unnoticed. But Hooper uses an audio "reality effect" to heighten the LUPs' visual impact. Throughout the episode, Hooper uses music conventionally, to support a mood or a sequence; or for foreshadowing, as in the opening flashback to the doomed party: guttural sounds rumble while we see bright, airy balloons, and a haunting, disembodied girls' chorus sings, "Ring around the rosie . . . We all fall down." But at the Doom Room, extradiegetic music becomes diegetic as we see bands producing sounds that the characters hear, which adds authenticity to the scenario and lends the viewer a sense of being present with the on-screen audience (Rodman 2010, 190–191). Whereas the club's music in the source story made passing attempts at lyricism—"A moaning brassiness, all muted. A jazzman's conception of *the palpable obscure*"—the music here is grinding, unpleasant, the throbbing, electrified drone of postindustrial rage. But at these points the soundtrack offers a grounding of veracity when the LUPs appear—in



Figure 14.2. Mom, dancing with herself in “Dance of the Dead” (Tobe Hooper, Anchor Bay, 2005).

contrast to restaurant, home, and back rooms, spaces of manipulation and lies. The visible audience enhances the effect, since, Hooper comments, they were extras from the street (similar to Billy Idol’s dancers) in Vancouver; and the boundary between audience and performers is penetrated when, mid-episode, Peggy asks a club-goer to explain the LUPs and she replies, “It’s what happens to people like me.” Hooper further demystifies “celebrity” when Peggy places her mother onstage, using the show as a sort of folk ritual for rough justice in the absence of institutions.

The LUP reality effect has narrative logic. No screens are present in the episode; news is heard on radio. Trauma has rendered visual art, the horror film, and all the mass-mediated vanities of visual pop culture obsolete. Nothing but the real satisfies or has the power to distract for long; and monstrosity resides not in the dancers but in the audience, hardened victims of fate who demand the LUP spectacle. According to Hooper (in the DVD commentary): “An audience that will pay to see basically a dead frog jump when it is being electrocuted, for entertainment, is, you know, that’s a different . . . I’m talking about watching pure bloodletting.” This engagement, the opposite of baroque celebrity and passive fandom, is in direct contrast to John Carpenter’s auteur-serving vision in “Cigarette Burns” (*Masters of Horror*, December 16, 2005), in which a film is accorded the power to provoke riot and self-mutilation. And it recalls the fraught discussions over “how Hollywood should respond” to 9/11 (A. Lane 2001). Hooper proposes, perhaps fears, that whatever Hollywood’s response to reality, deep damage to subjectivities might render representation not just “improper” or inadequate but irrelevant.

Idol’s anecdote about the origins of “Dancing with Myself” in a Tokyo nightclub whimsically evokes Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage of development, in which human infants develop a sense of self by seeing an ideal version of themselves in the reflection (and later recognize idealized others, starting with the mother, as symbolic cognition proceeds). The song’s lyrics include the lines “With the record selection and the mirror’s reflection / Leave me dancing with myself.” “Dance” is a fatalistic inversion of Lacan. In the turbulence of

social degeneration, weak institutions, and rapacious capitalism, Peggy sees her mother onstage and knows—has accepted—that her destiny lies on that same stage. Her mother, a nameless LUP, has become an unidealized version of herself, and the only “development” left is her slide toward death.

When singers in music videos address the camera, they flirt with the fourth wall but do not break it; artifice is hermetically maintained for the star power it corrals. There is no such pretense here. The mother’s last, empty-eyed look is aimed directly at the viewer: a fierce indictment for watching, and a mirror’s reflection (fig. 14.2).

From MTV to *Masters of Horror*, Hooper directed with creative aplomb and the versatility of a lifelong craftsman. His music video achieved high MTV rotation and earned him a nomination for Best Direction in a Video at the MTV Awards in 1984. Beyond “supporting” the song, the video playfully expanded its potential for meaning and reasserted the autonomy of the visual, a salutary approach in light of John Landis’s cynicism about the form (Tannenbaum and Marks 2012, 152).⁵ The video presented a new challenge, calling on his hybrid documentary-artistic technique, a talent that was among his most celebrated—and evident early in his three-and-a-half-hour director’s cut of a Peter, Paul and Mary documentary for PBS (Martin 1981, 39). Hooper enjoyed working with Idol and considered casting him in his upcoming *Lifeforce*, telling *Fangoria*, “This guy would [have been] perfect as one of the outer space entities,” but British actors’ union rules prevented that (Weinberg 1985, 25).

Twenty-two years later, Hooper continued to experiment, combining old and new technologies, exploring thematic continuities between past and present. “Dance of the Dead” is one of Hooper’s bleakest (and perhaps most personal) works; it envisions a near-future reality so horrendous that human monstrosity is conquering civilization, and images cannot do it justice. Yet Robert Englund recalled Hooper’s ebullience on the set: “I believe Tobe has made peace with being a horror icon, and on the *Dance* set it was sort of like, ‘I’m free, I’m free’ . . . You could see he really felt liberated . . . having fun and enjoying the process again” (Ferrante 2006, 68).

NOTES

1. Muir’s claim that Hooper later directed a video for the Cars could not be verified. In a November 17, 2019, conversation with Hooper’s friend and collaborator Stan Giese, Hooper’s son Tony expressed his belief that Hooper did not direct the video in question and noted that the cinematographer Daniel Pearl (*Texas Chain Saw*, “Dancing with Myself,” *Invaders from Mars*) had shot a number of music videos for the group, perhaps causing some confusion. Giese went on to mention a 1988 *Fangoria* article,

an interview with Hooper, that is possibly mistaken in its claim that Hooper directed the video for the group's single "Strap Me In," from the 1987 album *Door to Door* (Nutman 1988, 24).

2. "The difference between cinema and television lies not so much in the visual specificity of their images, as in the different roles of sound in each" (Chion [1990] 1994, 157).

3. Idol bore a tattoo of her and sold concert T-shirts with her image, and Hooper reinforced the cobranding with shots of her and Idol at the beginning and end of the video. Her towering likeness at the climax is intended to represent the victory of the rebellious spirit.

4. This essay was submitted before COVID-19 registered in the US. *Dance of the Dead*, a tragic American depiction of inattentive government, deception, and division and the sadomasochistic drive for personal satisfaction regardless of social cost, offers a trenchant vision of the nation fragmenting under duress. While 9/11 offers period resonance, Hooper's pessimism was targeted at deeper layers of national character, and is only more incisive now as the country loops between Zoom Room and Doom Room (JDM, December 2020).

5. Landis on "Thriller": "I didn't even want to make a rock video. I felt they were just commercials to sell records. But what was interesting to me was Michael's ginormous celebrity. I thought, 'Shit, I could exploit this, and maybe make a theatrical short'" (Tannenbaum and Marks 2012, 152).

THE PAST INFECTS THE PRESENT

Abjection and Identity in Tobe Hooper's 1990s TV and Video Productions

JOHN PAUL TAYLOR

IN *POWERS OF HORROR*, JULIA Kristeva describes abject matter as that which we expel or eject from our bodies—such as “corporeal waste” and “excrement”—and in so doing further define ourselves as subjects ([1980] 1982, 4). It thus seems wholly appropriate to apply abjection as a critical approach for examining three objects in Tobe Hooper's body of work that have been either ignored by scholars and critics or derided when considered at all (Muir [2002] 2015, 41, 42). These discarded works—*I'm Dangerous Tonight* (1990), *Night Terrors* (1994), and *The Apartment Complex* (1999)—are doubly abject in being either made-for-TV or direct-to-video releases, modes of production that have been “damned by critics” and associated with poor production values and network meddling (Stone 2017, 615). Nevertheless, in examining these abject works through a Kristevian lens, we might consider them to be constitutive of Hooper's directorial identity, signifying “the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be” (Kristeva [1980] 1982, 4). Through these cast-off productions, we can more clearly identify and analyze Hooper's career-long preoccupation with the dangers of the unresolved past as an infectious force. These works adopt classic Gothic themes, telling stories of abject and violent pasts that have been ignored or repressed and that have acquired a malignancy that spreads to those naïve, curious, or greedy enough to uncover them.

In these three films, Hooper presents abject pasts that threaten to violate the past-present boundary and become, in Kristeva's terms, “death infecting life” ([1980] 1982, 4). In each, unburied pasts become “infectious,” confronting both the protagonist and the viewer with a sense of the subject's fragility and ephemerality. If abjection is, as Kristeva writes, that which is “opposed to I” and helps delineate the border of the subject's identity, then the past—discarded, expelled, used up—helps define the subject as belonging to the present.

Returning to Kristeva's conception of the abject as corporeal waste, we might even understand the past as the present's temporal refuse. To be consumed by it is, then, to become detritus, a mere echo of what once was solid, agentic.

The Gothic atmospheres that Hooper constructs in these works provide fertile ground for the resurfacing of abject pasts. As Fred Botting writes, Gothic tales often depend on "the disturbing return of pasts upon presents" (Botting 2013, 1). The Gothic past is kin to the abject in its tendency to "not only provoke repugnance, disgust and recoil" but also interest and fascination (6); the abject, Kristeva writes, similarly "fascinates desire" while also engendering disgust ([1980] 1982, 1). Further solidifying this connection between the abject and the Gothic, Kristeva explains that "from its place of banishment the abject does not cease challenging its master" (2). Consistent with the Gothic tradition, the movies at hand illustrate how such pasts, left unresolved, continually menace the present by infecting and infiltrating the bodies and psyches of those who inevitably stumble upon them.

Across Hooper's oeuvre is a recurrent interest in varieties of archaeology. Protagonists uncover lost spaces, lost people, and lost presences, which are invariably configured as malevolent and deformed by neglect and repression. The protagonists of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) become victims because of their eagerness to discover their family's ancestral home. In *Poltergeist* (1982), homebuilders pave over a forgotten graveyard, which unleashes spirits that torment the family that lives there. In these films, pasts rendered hostile by ages of neglect and repression are brought into contact with the present through ill-advised excavation or exploration. In his historical survey of Hooper's career, John Kenneth Muir likewise notes that while Hooper was initially approached by Steven Spielberg to direct a more horrific "sequel to *Close Encounters*" concerning "an alien assault on an isolated farmhouse," Hooper was uninterested in the project and instead suggested that the duo collaborate on *Poltergeist*, a story of the vengeful past (Muir [2002] 2015, 24). Muir further writes that Hooper reimaged the story of *Lifeorce* (1985), originally set on a futuristic Earth threatened by the arrival of an alien spacecraft, and instead set it in the present and tied the arrival of the spaceship to the return of Halley's comet (30). These production histories reveal a director urgently concerned with grappling with repressed, abjected pasts.

As Hooper's career entered the 1990s, the hostile past began to take on the character of an infection. In *Spontaneous Combustion* (1990), the protagonist is infected by radioactivity inherited from his parents. In the thirty-five-minute segment "Eye," which Hooper directed for the John Carpenter-produced Showtime anthology *Body Bags* (1993), the main character receives an experimental eye transplant from a deceased serial killer and develops murderous



Figure 15.1. A transplanted eyeball infects Brent Matthews (Mark Hamill) with its original owner's murderous tendencies in "Eye" (Tobe Hooper, Showtime Networks, 1993).

tendencies himself, as though infected by the killer's pathology (fig. 15.1). Of the two, "Eye" bears the stronger similarities to the feature-length works discussed here. The doctors deliberately conceal the violent past contained within a material artifact (the titular eye), which, when implanted, infects the psyche of the protagonist, leading to the loss of his identity to a past one (that of the serial killer). "Eye" likewise shares Gothic themes with the films analyzed below in its use of a returned, atavistic past that, once allowed (or invited) into the present, comes to dominate it. Nevertheless, both "Eye" and *Spontaneous Combustion* rely primarily on physical horror and gore, and on scientific and medical ideas of infection, unlike the works described at length here, which focus primarily on threats to the psyche and identity and on archaeological themes that more directly implicate the infectious nature of violent, repressed pasts.

I'M DANGEROUS TONIGHT

Archaeology is a force welcoming the infectious past into the present in *I'm Dangerous Tonight*, a made-for-TV movie produced for the USA Network's "Up All Night" programming block, starring Mädchen Amick as Amy, a psychology student, and Anthony Perkins as Dr. Buchanan, her professor. The movie centers on a red Aztec cloak used in ritual human sacrifice; it calls out to those near it and, once worn, unleashes their repressed desires. The suspense in the film is driven by the movement of the "cursed" fabric from person to person, first as a

ceremonial cloak and later as a revealing red dress that produces sexual desire in the men who lay eyes on its wearer. The artifact thus represents how violent and twisted pasts may linger in and infiltrate the present, and also present a dangerous allure. This aligns with Kristeva's conception of abjection as a force that both "beseeches," as the fabric calls out to and seduces those around it, and "pulverizes," as it dominates the identity of its wearers and often drives them to kill ([1980] 1982, 5).

The film begins with the arrival of the cloak at the fictional Tiverton College after it has been acquired under dubious circumstances by Professor Jonas Wilson, who is seeking to prove a theory about the animism of artifacts used in ritual sacrifice. The soundtrack, which here suggests the rattling of bones, heightens the sense of anxiety and foreboding around the cloak, which comes delivered inside an ornately decorated altar, draped around the neck of a mummified corpse whose face is permanently twisted into a scream. This shot—which provides perhaps the most shocking and spectacular effect in the entire film—transfers the abject visual horror associated with the ancient corpse to an otherwise inanimate object. Hooper encapsulates and condenses the atavistic violence—a key underpinning of the Gothic's sense of the past—of a history of ritual sacrifice into a simple prop. This economizes the film's horror and heightens the object's frightening nature through its association with the unearthed corpse, suggesting an unburied past long suppressed by the weight of centuries of forgetfulness.

After Professor Wilson, under the sway of the cloak's malign powers, goes on an offscreen killing spree, Amy acquires the cloak from his estate sale to use as a prop in a theater department production of *Romeo and Juliet*. When she first lays hands on it, we see her relive the memories of previous wearers through flashbacks, signifying both the infection of her psyche by a violent past and the return of such pasts to subsume and corrupt identity in the present. The fabric urges those who see it to put it on, heightening its quality of abjection, which, according to Kristeva, compels fascination as much as repulsion ([1980] 1982, 1). This sublime quality of desire is shown when the cloak calls out to Amy, a skilled seamstress, to transform it into a revealing evening dress, which even more directly materializes the dangerous allure of a violent and twisted past by rendering it sexually attractive.

It is also through sexual attraction that the cloak's violent past begins to spread throughout Tiverton like an infection, corrupting each person who wears the cursed fabric. When Amy wears the dress, she is overcome by desire and crashes a dance she had not planned to attend. There, her ordinarily mild manner is replaced by openly sexual behavior as she makes herself the center of attention. Under the sway of the dress, she seduces her rival cousin's boyfriend,

and the madness ends only when he removes the dress in the back of his car, after which Amy's previous meekness returns and she flees. In this scene, we observe that the fabric does not by its nature drive people to kill, but rather unleashes the suppressed id of the wearer, allowing primal desires to come to the fore. Disgusted with her connection with the cursed artifact, but unwilling to destroy it, she hides the dress at the bottom of her closet, signifying her inability to let go of the cloak now that she is connected with it.

While the dress's properties prove relatively benign when it is donned by the mild-mannered Amy, they prove deadly when her more mean-spirited cousin Gloria—spurred by her jealousy of Amy's ability to attract attention while wearing it—locates the dress and steals it. Upon donning it, she becomes entirely infected by and mired in its malicious id enhancement. The dress possesses her to sneak up on her philandering boyfriend, Mason, in the shower (possibly an homage to costar Perkins's iconic murder scene in *Psycho* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1960]) and garrote him with a curtain tieback. After the strangling, the film cuts to a low-angle shot that places Mason out of the frame as we see Gloria, towering over him, reach for his razor blade and lower it, out of view, to castrate him just as we cut to the next scene. This act of brutality emphasizes the extent to which the abjected past, as materialized by the dress, utterly subsumes the identity of the wearer. Thereafter, Gloria returns home to take revenge on Amy, attempting to run her down with Mason's massive truck. In the process, she drives the truck over a railing and is consumed in the flames of the wreck.

While this would seem to end the story, the dress's infectious powers are confirmed when we learn that it was in fact not consumed by flames, but somehow survived and was acquired by a morgue worker named Wanda, who embarks on a killing spree of her own. Wanda kills a succession of drug dealers before turning her murderous attention to Amy, who, she discovers, is attempting to track down the missing dress. In an unlikely turn of events, Wanda knocks Amy unconscious, but Amy awakens in her bed wearing the dress, which her boyfriend, Eddie, has removed from Wanda (after killing her, we learn) and placed on her. He has done this, he explains, so that "we can share the power together," and he crawls on top of Amy and begins kissing her. Eddie too has been infected by the fabric's curse, having worn it briefly as a prop cloak earlier in the movie.

While it appears that Amy is, for a moment, ready to give herself over to the power of the dress, her smile disappears abruptly and she argues back, pushing Eddie away: "No, no, can't you understand? It corrupts like a drug, it corrupts everything it touches." In the course of the movie's climax, Amy flees the house, strips off the dress, and destroys it with Eddie's help after prevailing on his better nature. While this scene conveniently satisfies the demands of the risqué,

young-male-targeted *USA Up All Night* programming block by having Amy strip down for the camera in the rain, Hooper turns this production setting's penchant for unabashed trashiness into a narratively motivated act that serves the film's broader themes (Marin 1992).¹ Amy ultimately places the dress in a nearby wood chipper and later scatters its tatters in Wanda's grave in the hopes that it will remain buried forever. Yet as the fragments of the dress fly from the chipper, they suggest an infectious miasma that may simply increase the contagion of its corrupting power. This suggestion is fulfilled in the final scene: we see Professor Buchanan—who has provided Amy advice throughout the movie but always seemed a dubious figure—digging up Wanda's grave and stuffing the scattered remains of the dress into his sweater. This ad hoc archaeological dig, driven by his fascination with an abject destructive past and his desire to possess its power, ensures that the infection of the cloak's past in the present will continue to claim more victims.

NIGHT TERRORS

Hooper's preoccupation with archaeology and its potential dangers is given further embodiment in *Night Terrors*, a direct-to-video feature that was the product of a troubled production to which Hooper arrived late to replace the original director (Muir [2002] 2015, 42). As a result, it is perhaps Tobe Hooper's most unusual film, particularly given its abundant soft-core pornographic elements. Nevertheless, it illustrates Hooper's preoccupation with the exhumation of violent suppressed pasts perhaps more directly than any other film in his oeuvre. The film stars Robert Englund as both the Marquis de Sade and his present-day descendent Paul Chevalier. *Night Terrors* concerns de Sade's obsession with taking revenge on his former lover, Eugenie de Beaumont, and how that past obsession and revenge are carried out in the present against Genie Matteson, who, it is implied, is a descendant of Beaumont. The film thus complicates the question of past and present identities: Chevalier—totally corrupted by his connection and obsession with his sadistic lineage—is difficult to distinguish from de Sade, and over the course of the film Genie is increasingly subsumed into the identity of Beaumont as she gradually becomes corrupted. Such confusion and “dissolution of identity,” observed previously in *I'm Dangerous Tonight* and later in *The Apartment Complex* but given its fullest expression in *Night Terrors*, not only raise the specter of infection by an abject past but also constitute one of the “definitive perils” of the Gothic tradition (McRobert 2014, 299).

The film jumps between de Sade's early nineteenth-century French prison cell—where, in a series of interludes, he wryly expounds on the nature of



Figure 15.2. Robert Englund as the Marquis de Sade in "Night Terrors" (Tobe Hooper, Global Pictures / Golan-Globus Productions, 1994).

death, pain, and sex as he is tortured by his captors—and present-day Alexandria, Egypt, where his descendant Chevalier is the head of a decadent cult of libertines out to corrupt the souls of the pure and to avenge de Sade. They aim to do so by luring Genie into their inner circle and also by manipulating her archaeologist father in order to gain possession of ancient Gnostic manuscripts that could shake the foundations of contemporary Christianity. The cult manipulates both characters' desires to understand more about their pasts: Genie through her fascination with Chevalier's cult and her connection with Madame de Beaumont, and her father through his desire to know more about the origins of his strong Christian faith. In *Night Terrors*, Hooper's preoccupation with archaeology as a vehicle for calling forth malevolent, repressed pasts is explicitly both the lure that brings the Mattesons to Alexandria and the impetus for the murders that result. While it might seem right to leave this malevolent, Sadean past buried and forgotten, the film shows that Genie's entrapment and corruption are a direct result of her ignorance of her connections with Beaumont and Sade, and also of the sexual repression wrought by her father's overbearing faith. This suggests the protective value of grappling with—rather than repressing—violent and dangerous pasts.

In *Night Terrors*, Hooper goes to great lengths to depict Genie as not only out of place but also out of time, casting the places and people around her as wildly Other. This displacement is emphasized in an early scene in which she decides to tour Alexandria in short-shorts and a crop top; she strongly stands

out from the surrounding crowds, whose members are clad in long robes, headscarves, and veils, the contrast highlighting the naïveté that renders her vulnerable to the horrors that ensue. As though to emphasize the barbarism of her surroundings (or her flagrant ignorance of them), she is attacked by two men who sexually assault her in an alleyway, but is rescued by Sabina—Chevalier's lieutenant—who has been following and watching her. The rescue leads to a visit to Sabina's opulent apartment, where a portrait of Beaumont is flanked by dusty volumes of de Sade's writings, forming a makeshift altar that fascinates Genie, who realizes her resemblance to Beaumont. As a parting gift, Sabina takes a volume of *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (1795) from the altar and gives it to Genie, a nod to the Gothic device of the "discovered manuscript" (Botting 2013, 113).

So begins Genie's "corruption," which she appears more than willing to undergo. She begins cavorting with Sabina and attending the cult's parties, over her father's objections (though he never reveals his connection with the cult to her). As her fascination further entraps her within the cult, she becomes increasingly bound to the identity of Madame de Beaumont, mired in a past identity not her own. While the film is shot through with the infectious risks of archaeological exploration, three key scenes show how the sadistic past comes to infect the present, welcomed by the avarice of the archaeologist and the naïve fascination of his daughter.

In the first, Genie attends a party with Sabina at a club that is decidedly contemporary in comparison with the film's earlier depictions of Alexandria; loud rock music plays while men in suits and women in revealing dresses socialize. Shortly after their arrival, however, Sabina leads Genie through a curtain in the back of the club, and in an instant they seem to have walked through a door into the past: the rock music is replaced by traditional Arabic music, the men are dressed in long robes, and the women are scantily dressed in gossamer lingerie that recalls popular imagery of belly dancers. The scene suggests that an abject past is lurking literally just behind the façade of the present, waiting to be uncovered so it can enter our time. Genie and Sabina sidle up to each other on a tufted sofa; their feet are erotically washed by male attendants, and a hookah is rolled up to them. While Genie is distracted by her foot washer, Sabina places a hallucinogen in the hookah, which causes Genie to have visions of a snake-wielding belly dancer as an orgy erupts around her.

Genie's initial response to this backroom experience is one of curiosity and excitement. But as her hallucinations intensify and expand to include visions of her father warning of her "sins against the Lord," a look of fear fills her face, reflecting anxiety over her loss of control of herself and the situation. Genie's hallucinations prefigure later flashbacks and visions that signify both the

growing extent of her entrapment in a past identity and the cult's efforts to remake her into Madame de Beaumont. Here, Hooper balances demands for a kind of soft-core eroticism that is out of character with his earlier work with a desire to create an unsettling effect. While the orgy scene is designed to provoke an erotic reaction, Hooper uses it to also produce anxiety around Genie's infection by a past identity and her growing enmeshment in Chevalier's cult.

In a later sequence, some American friends take Genie into the desert to enjoy a Bedouin horse race. In encouraging her to come, a friend alludes to Genie's fascination with the exoticized and eroticized Egyptian past: "The Arab thing," she says, "tents, drums, veils. You'll love it." It is here that Genie first lays eyes on Mahmoud—who is later revealed to be an initiate of Chevalier's cult—and the film uses a series of jump cuts that recall Genie's hallucination during the orgy to suggest her fascination with him. Mahmoud invites Genie back to his village for a private horse ride on the beach, which is followed by a lengthy soft-core sex scene in his tent. In *Night Terrors*, as in *I'm Dangerous Tonight*, the abject past has a strong erotic allure that engenders fascination in those who encounter it.

Hooper uses the scene to further show the infection of Genie's psyche by a past identity. We next see her sitting on her porch, reading eagerly in de Sade's *Philosophy in the Boudoir*. As she reads, the film cuts to shots of de Sade in his dungeon cell narrating the same book aloud to himself while also somehow appearing to orchestrate the events taking place in the present, remaking Genie in the image of de Beaumont. After cutting back to Genie reading on her porch, the film then cuts to her fantasy, in which Mahmoud—naked—rides a stallion down the beach, whipping it suggestively with a riding crop, followed by another soft-core sex scene in which he ravishes her. The scene ends with another shot of de Sade narrating from his work as he sneers at a portrait of Beaumont hanging on the wall of his cell. The film connects Genie's actual sexual engagement with the cult with the writings of de Sade in order to suggest her having given herself completely over to the libertine cult and the past identity of Beaumont. Genie's fascination with the erotics of her repressed lineage, and the fantasies of sexual power and control it conjures, collapses the border between the present and the corrupt, abject past and renders them almost indistinguishable.

This collapse of past and present into each other is consummated in the third key scene, immediately following, in which Genie attends a costume party held by the cult and finally meets Chevalier. As with the previous party, it appears to belong to the present day yet shows signs of the infectious past resurfacing. As Genie and the assembled guests watch a Renaissance-style Punch-and-Judy show that depicts de Sade's betrayal and imprisonment, a sudden smash cut takes the film to de Sade's cell, where Genie stands dressed as Beaumont and is

brought face-to-face with the marquis. “Ah, Madame de Beaumont,” says Sade, “I beckoned, you came.” De Sade explains that he will now take his “cruel” revenge on her and further explains, “You and I . . . are one” before the film dissolves back to the party. This scene combines de Sade’s evocation of identity loss with a flashback to events that Genie never experienced (a technique similarly deployed in *I’m Dangerous Tonight*) to signify her complete loss of ability to differentiate herself from the identity of Beaumont.

In the film’s climax, Chevalier acquires the Gnostic scrolls and captures Genie after murdering her family and friends. Genie escapes after prevailing on Sabina’s sympathies, and Chevalier is killed by a secret group of hooded Gnostics who recover the scrolls and restore them to their proper place within the logic of the film: buried and forgotten, as they should be. *Night Terrors* differs substantially from Hooper’s overall body of work in its setting and its obsession with soft-core erotica, potentially owing to his having arrived late to its troubled production (Muir [2002] 2015, 42). It also rates as perhaps the director’s most critically derided film.² Nevertheless, in its manipulation of time, space, and identity, this work, perhaps more explicitly than any of his other works, illustrates Hooper’s imagining of the thin and porous border that separates the present from the infectious and abject past.

THE APARTMENT COMPLEX

The Apartment Complex first aired on Showtime on October 31, 1999. Despite its Halloween release date, the movie tends less toward the horror genre and more toward the realm of comedy and mystery, supporting the idea that it was intended as a “back-door pilot” for a sitcom (Muir [2002] 2015, 45). This perhaps explains the movie’s lack of graphic violence and use of only a small number of carefully placed effects shots to heighten anxiety without rising to the level of horror. The movie tells the story of Stan Warden, a psychology graduate student who accepts a job as the live-in manager of a rundown apartment complex in Hollywood (the “Wonder View”) in order to help make ends meet. Significantly, we are first introduced to Stan as he stands alongside other psychological researchers dispassionately observing rats navigating a maze, an image that dissolves into the shot of his initial arrival at the Wonder View.

Stan and the viewer are given the immediate impression that the Wonder View is an unnatural place. It features unusual geometry, which mirrors that of the rat maze and is typified by its quadrilateral swimming pool with four unequal sides, and its residents³—apart from one unusually normal couple—represent a textbook of neuroses: a pair of unpredictably violent young actresses; an older man who believes he is a CIA agent; a self-professed police psychic; and

an abusive man and the woman who continues to return to him. Stan begins the film by observing these unusual tenants with the same curiosity with which he views his laboratory mice, with a kind of distant clinical interest, his stable sense of identity anchored by his self-perception as an outsider and observer.

The film begins to play out its anxieties about the past's infectious possibilities when the building's owner, Dr. Caligari, whose name, combined with the unusual geometry of the building, pays homage to German expressionist filmmaking, gives Stan a tour of his new home: the manager's apartment. The apartment is filled with artifacts belonging to the former manager, much of it sealed in plastic or packed into boxes labeled "Property of Glumley." The space looks like a dusty ruin of an archive. Fatefully, Stan jimmies open the locked drawer of a dusty old desk that contains—among many other things—a journal and a revolver. Stan pages through the journal—a return to the Gothic device of the secreted manuscript, seen previously in *Night Terrors*—and unearths the rantings of a mad man, but finds the revolver even more fascinating, posing with it in a nearby mirror. As with Genie in *Night Terrors*, Stan's interaction with the remnants of the past eventually result in a case of mistaken identity that jeopardizes his freedom, a warning about the dangers of glibly interfering with the forgotten relics of the Wonder View's past.

Shortly after his excavation of the old manager's apartment, Stan cleans the pool, tinted a filthy amber yellow color that almost seems to glow, indicating age, decay, and neglect. The pool seems filled with innumerable discarded objects, an abject storehouse of forgotten pasts. After dredging out a patio chair, however, he uncovers a much larger and ominous object: a bloated corpse wearing a jumpsuit labeled "Property of Glumley," presumably the body of the former manager. As he pulls the body from the pool, we notice that Stan is wearing rubber boots and gloves similarly labeled "Property of Glumley," symbolizing his connection with the dead man and the increasing loss of his present identity to a dead, past one. These connections are further emphasized when, as Stan pulls the body from the pool, its fingernails—seeming impossibly animated—scrape him, not only recalling imagery from zombie movies but also creating the impression of an infection by the Wonder View's lurid past that will haunt Stan later when he becomes a suspect in Glumley's murder.

The Apartment Complex derives its primary tension from Stan's inability to distinguish himself either from the past manager or his murderer, threatening his stable sense of identity as a distant observer as he is absorbed into the disturbed world of the Wonder View. The entry of detectives into the manager's apartment produces a Kafkaesque dread that we too may find ourselves unable to prove who we really are. When the detectives, Culver and Duarte, search the manager's apartment for the first time, a key exchange takes place:

STAN: Don't you need a warrant to search my apartment?

DUARTE: We would, if we were searching your apartment, but our records show this apartment is still leased to the victim—

CULVER: And we don't need a warrant to search a victim's domicile.

Shortly thereafter, the detectives uncover the gun that Stan had previously posed with.

CULVER: What's [this] doing in your apartment?

STAN: Well, I thought this was *his* apartment. Wouldn't that make it *his* gun?

This borderline absurdist exchange makes visible Stan's decreasing ability to separate his own identity from that of the former manager, a problem amplified when he must eventually admit to having handled the old manager's gun, connecting him with the crime and the body found in the pool. Further complicating matters, the detectives warn him that he cannot throw away any of the old manager's possessions, since they are now "evidence." Thus, in assuming the identity of apartment manager and coming into contact with his predecessor's possessions, Stan assumes responsibility for a physical archive from which he cannot separate himself. As Stan becomes further enmeshed in the identity of the former manager, he briefly fantasizes about how much easier it would be to be a mouse in the maze rather than the observer, to simply acquiesce in the maddening past of the apartment complex.

Stan's inseparability from this past is compounded when a DNA test detects his DNA under the fingernails of the body found in the pool, consonant with the scratch marks on his arm, and he is arrested. Stan's fascination with the abject artifacts, the gun and the journal—as well as his desire to explore the submerged past of the pool and the subsequent retrieval of the body—have resulted in fateful connections with a past not his own. Fortunately for Stan, he has grown on the tenants of the Wonder View during his brief tenure as manager, and they use their combined skills to forge a suicide note that they claim to find amid the junk of the manager's apartment. Thus, Stan's absorption into the fold of the Wonder View's residents leads to his deliverance from the legal system, a powerful message that a productive engagement with the abject can lead to liberation.

Now freed, Stan returns to the manager's apartment to find—unexpectedly—Glumley. Glumley explains that he killed the resident of apartment 9, whose corpse was pulled from the pool, and assumed his identity as a way of proving to himself and the world that the residents of the Wonder View never noticed

or respected him. He attempts to kill Stan because he knows too much, sealing him in a waterbed suggestively labeled "Property of Glumley." In the film's most anxiety-inducing scene, the Wonder View's residents come to the apartment, overtake Glumley, and uncover a desperate and drowning Stan beneath the bedsheets, fully submerged into the artifacts of the manager's apartment. They cut him from the bed, freeing him from drowning in the abject past and an identity not his own.

In the final scene, the assembled residents stand with Stan by the side of the now sparkling-clean pool, which has been "acid-washed and steam cleaned." To further emphasize their confrontation with and resolution of the Wonder View's disturbing past, the psychic Miss Chenille performs a ritual cleansing involving "a lemon rind to banish any bad feelings that might be left behind" and "a little salt, to remind us that death is a part of life." The ritual thus suggests the banishment (and sterilization) of a violent past, but also contains a reminder of the necessity of confronting and resolving pasts rather than burying and ignoring them.

As the film ends, the camera pulls back to an aerial shot of the Wonder View courtyard that dissolves into the familiar shot of the rat maze as we hear the voices of the residents speaking over one another in a confused cacophony. We might read this final shot as a hopeful, though grimly humorous meditation on the idea that critical distance is an illusion, and that only in allowing ourselves to enter the maze—to come face-to-face with abjected histories—can we set ourselves free.

Although these three works may be regarded as the nadir of Hooper's career, they elucidate his concerns with repressed and violent pasts in ways that cohere with and that improve our understanding of the rest of his filmography. *I'm Dangerous Tonight*, *Night Terrors*, and *The Apartment Complex* share themes of archaeology and infection, and clearly identify abjected histories as potential threats not just to one's body—a threat apparent in other Hooper works—but also to one's identity and sense of autonomy. Through his use of Gothic tropes such as flashbacks, doubling, cursed artifacts, and cases of mistaken or lost identity, Hooper coherently uses these films to articulate not only the dangers of naïvely welcoming the abject past into the present, but also the importance of confronting repressed history rather than simply burying it for future generations to discover.

NOTES

1. The series (1989–1998), hosted by Gilbert Gottfried and Rhonda Shear, showcased salacious B films of various genres.

2. For example, John Stanley calls *Night Terrors* “an ugly piece of crap” (quoted in Muir [2002] 2015, 124), and Muir describes the film as “a heavy-handed, turgid muddle of a movie that isn’t thrilling or even particularly erotic (though it has been dubbed an ‘erotic thriller’)” (126).

3. The cast of the apartment is, in retrospect, quite interesting, since it includes Tyra Banks, Gina Mari, Amanda Plummer, R. Lee Ermey, Patrick Warburton, Fay Masterson, and Jon Polito as well as Chad Lowe as Stan.

"GET BACK TO WORK!"

Critiquing the Hollywood-Industrial Complex in *The Mangler*

CLAYTON DILLARD

THE *SATURDAY REVIEW* CRITIC HOLLIS Alpert remarked after seeing *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) at a press screening that the film was "a perfect money machine" (quoted in J. Lewis 2007, 61). One suspects that Alpert would not have said the same had he seen *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) at a press screening the year prior, not because it wouldn't prove profitable—given its production budget of about \$140,000, it would—but because the film's box-office take would be garnered largely in the disreputable forums of grindhouses and drive-ins rather than first-run theaters.¹ Alpert's focus on *Jaws*'s financial potential rather than its formal or artistic characteristics indicates a shift in public and media interests during the mid-1970s toward determining a film's success based on its profitability, making the industry "a simple matter of mathematics and not aesthetics" (62). Those markers of success have remained in place. Such tensions between art and money define the career of Tobe Hooper, particularly the twenty-one-year span from 1974 to 1995, during which he directed nine films that were given a North American theatrical release.² The last of those films was *The Mangler*, an adaptation of a Stephen King short story released by New Line Cinema in March 1995. The film's stint in theaters was brief; it was yanked after grossing only \$1.8 million in wide release over two weeks (Shapiro 1995, 22).³ The film's financial failure was attributable in part to negative reviews from major newspapers, which dismissed it as, among other jibes, a "debacle" (Harrington 1995) and "the horror movie equivalent of visual and verbal gibberish" (Holden 1995).

A closer look at *The Mangler* in the context of Hooper's relationship to the process of film production in Hollywood demonstrates how thoughtful and reflexive elements within the film pertain to Hooper's own genre-inflected artistry. *The Mangler* is a critique of the Hollywood-industrial complex from the perspective of an artist whose reluctance to fit into a convenient artistic mode

afforded him minimal financial viability within the mainstream marketplace. *The Mangler* further evinces Hooper's unfashionable artistic interests, including the film's use of a decidedly expressionistic mise-en-scène and Robert Englund's depiction of Bill Gartley as a vampiric relic whose pinstriped suits offer one of numerous visual allusions to the iconography of villainous industrialists in classical Hollywood cinema. Taken as a whole, these elements formulate an implicit refusal on Hooper's part to acquiesce in the broader aesthetic trends of the 1990s, a time when even adaptations of King's work momentarily fell out of commercial favor.⁴ *The Mangler* finally articulates Hooper's permanent status as a marginalized and misunderstood figure within the larger machinery of industrial filmmaking.

THE SHORT STORY

In Stephen King's "The Mangler," first published in a 1972 issue of *Cavalier* and collected in *Night Shift* (1978), the eponymous entity is the Hadley-Watson Model-6 Speed Ironer and Folder—a monstrous laundry machine responsible for killing an elderly woman named Frawley. It functions in the story as a peculiar mechanism for demonic possession, one that, though a marker of industrial capitalism, is primarily present for its strange, phantasmagoric potential.⁵ Little about the twenty-page story, in which John Hunton, a detective, and Mark Jackson, a professor, decide to perform an exorcism on the industrial appliance, speaks beyond the odd notion of having to apply "Christian white magic," as Mark puts it, to a washing machine (Stephen King 1978, 87). The story is short on visual description or thematic heft and long on having Hunton and Mark hustle from one location to another to try to piece together what they are up against. Thus, the "mangler" makes more for a striking concept in King's work than an extensive, or even conceptual, imagining of bone-crunching menace, and it certainly lacks the critical framework of opposition to Hollywood that Hooper's coauthored screenplay puts into place. The short story omits the daily procedures of the Blue Ribbon Laundry, instead focusing on the unlikely duo's investigation, climaxing with their unsuccessful exorcism. During the event, Mark is killed and Hunton, hysterical from the ordeal, ends the story by reeling at the prospect of the demonic entity escaping the machine and finding another host. Therefore, while the story provides the framework for the laundry as a site of capitalist production, it performs little of that work.

The most significant alteration in Hooper's film is the creation of Gartley, the Blue Ribbon's owner, a maniacal tyrant overseeing the laundry with an iron fist, barking orders at subordinates, harping on deadlines, and luring the younger women of the laundry's exclusively female workforce behind the

closed doors of his office. As King's story opens, Hunton enters the Blue Ribbon Laundry in Rikers Valley, Maine, to investigate a disturbance. There he finds Frawley's remains and asks for Gartley, who is nowhere to be found. In fact, Gartley appears in King's story by name only. It is Stanner, the laundry's foreman, who briefly makes contact with Hunton and gives a face to the human arm of industrial operations.

Gartley's costuming—a pinstriped suit and metal braces on his legs—becomes, in Hooper's adaptation, a monstrous combination of the professionalism of studio heads from the classical Hollywood era and the robotic dimensions of assembly-line capitalism (Eyman 2009, 7).⁶ To riff on André Bazin's statement that Hollywood's success lay in "the genius of the system,"⁷ Gartley's persistent admonitions to his predominately female workforce show that system's intelligence degrading those who toil at its margins. While the mechanical destruction of humans is a recurring theme of King's work, in, for example, the novel *Christine* (1983) and the short story "Trucks," the latter published along with "The Mangler" in *Night Shift*, Hooper draws a through line from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* to *The Mangler* by focusing on how the human response to industrialization, particularly as an abuse of power, constitutes its own form of monstrosity.⁸ In the earlier film, the victims of automation lash out against a group of tourists because of their own perceived obsolescence, and in the latter film it is those who control the machinery that represent the site of terror. The reversal indicates the crux of Hooper's critique; he, like the Sawyer family, was rendered obsolete by a system that could find no financial worth in his labor.

THE MACHINERY OF FILMMAKING

The film adaptation of *The Mangler* illustrates how changes to the story pertain to the context of Hollywood filmmaking. In short, given Hooper's relegation to low-budget productions following the poor box-office performances of *Life-force* (1985), *Invaders from Mars* (1986), and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986), *The Mangler* may be understood as a reflexive critique of the American film industry as machinery that swallows up the careers of artists who try to function within its profit-driven confines. The Hollywood renaissance during the early years of the 1970s produced the expectation that filmmakers would develop a simultaneously artistic and commercial vision that could translate into box-office success. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, despite being an independently produced feature, was precisely that; while the film grossed nearly \$15 million across 1975, becoming the year's fourteenth-highest box-office earner, it also "became a critical *cause célèbre* among cineastes," with screenings



Figure 16.1. The mechanical monster awaiting its next victim in *The Mangler* (Tobe Hooper, New Line Cinema, 1995).

at Cannes and the Museum of Modern Art (Cook 2000, 229). For the next twenty years, Hooper tried to replicate that financial and artistic success, to little avail. That *The Mangler* was Hooper's last film to receive theatrical distribution is not only indicative of a final failure in that two-decade trajectory, but also emblematic of the kinds of work that Hooper was generally attracted to throughout his career: unsentimental, gruesome, and darkly comedic films that shuffle across genres rather than work within one. *The Mangler* combines elements of horror, science fiction, and detective narratives with morbid humor, an amalgamation that made the film difficult for New Line to market, let alone turn into a profitable release.

Hooper's adaptation of "The Mangler" inflates the machine, the Hadley-Watson Model-6 Speed Ironer and Folder, (fig. 16.1) into a "mechanical behemoth," making it span the entirety of the Blue Ribbon Laundry's factory floor (Magistrale 2003, 163). In *The Mangler*, the victims are the female workers at the Blue Ribbon, whose existence is defined by an ability to maintain the speed of production desired by Gartley. While the adaptation retains the Maine setting of King's story, only a sign calling Rikers Valley "the industrial heart of Maine" gestures to the location. Otherwise, across the story's narrative duration, which lasts less than a day, the geographic setting is of little consequence. The sign's appearance near the film's beginning is a sardonic approximation of the Hollywood Sign or the notion of Tinseltown: what outwardly promises fulfillment brings only emptiness and destruction to those who venture within.

Variations on the phrase "get back to work" are uttered so often by Gartley

and Stanner during the film's opening scenes that they recall the famous industrial sequence in *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin, 1936) in which Chaplin's Factory Worker is reprimanded for taking a smoke break and told by his boss "get back to work." Bazin noted how Chaplin the actor became affiliated with a "mechanical cramp," referring to the comedic, spasmodic qualities of Chaplin's physicality (2017, 112). As both star and director, Chaplin filtered his cultural commentary through his own body. In making himself into a sort of mechanical being, he, rather than any machine, remained the star. The parallel from Chaplin to Hooper's notion of machinery is evident in the visual construction of the mangler, which looks to have been summoned from the bowels of a German expressionist hell. Its dimpled granite body and long, sinewy chains eschew the appearance of realism in favor of Gothic terror. As a visual tool, it is the star of the film more than any of the human figures. Moreover, the female employees within the Blue Ribbon contrast with the exclusively male assembly line of Chaplin's film. When Mrs. Frawley tells several younger employees to "be careful or you'll end up like me," she is foreshadowing her own death; just a scene later, she is sucked into the mangler and then slowly and graphically crushed by its gears. When Chaplin's Factory Worker is consumed by the machine on his assembly line in *Modern Times*, the result is a deadly serious gag in which the worker becomes entwined with the machine.⁹ Because *The Mangler* is at heart about the aftermath of a gruesome tragedy, Hooper's characters suffer unconscionable bodily harm in similar circumstances. As John (in King's story) later tells Mark Jackson, "There was a bad one today. . . . The worst. . . . They took her out in a basket" (Stephen King 1978, 81).

The exploitation of women in Hollywood is a trope that reaches back to the silent era, in which the "extra-girl narrative" became a significant, albeit brief trend. While the extra-girl narrative, according to Justin Gautreau, was intended by studios to "reduce the surplus of aspirants in Hollywood," its appearance in novels written by women of the same era contained narratives charting a character's trajectory from "extra, to movie star, to has-been" in an attempt to "keep women away from an industry that was . . . scandalously embalming youth for profit" (2014, 231). In fact, in Hooper's adaptation, Gartley is doing worse than that. The mangler primarily runs on the blood of sixteen-year-old virgin girls; Gartley explains late in the film that he sacrificed his own daughter years ago in order to obtain immortality. His Faustian bargain with "the beast," an unseen entity that lives inside the mangler, necessitates his funneling of girls into the machine as sacrifices to keep it sated.

Although this premise of the consumption of female bodies is adapted to the necessities of the horror genre, such a relationship is often replicated by the order of operations within any capitalist system that touts novelty and youth



Figure 16.2. The ghoulish face of assembly-line capitalism: Robert Englund in *The Mangler* (Tobe Hooper, New Line Cinema, 1995).

over loyalty to long-term employees or partners. In the film's opening sequence, Lin Sue and Sherry Ouelette, Gartley's teenage niece, are newly arrived workers at the Blue Ribbon; they subsequently become the primary witnesses of Mrs. Frawley's death. In retrospect, Frawley's warning to the girls not to "end up" like her fits the basic trajectory of the extra-girl narrative; Frawley is unable to get through the day without popping antacids, and her aging body marks her a figurative has-been. Indeed, a fundamental way to comprehend *The Mangler* is as a genre piece reflecting on the tragic dimensions of aging into obsolescence within a corporatist system that prizes youth and profit above all else. This premise applies in different ways to Frawley, Hunton, and Gartley. It also, crucially, helps inform why Hooper may have taken it upon himself to flesh out the characters of Hunton and Gartley in the screenplay, which is cocredited to Stephen Brooks and Peter Welbeck (Shapiro 1995, 21).

As Gartley, the Hooper regular Robert Englund snorts and puffs, a pompous figure of power in relation to the machine that controls operations on the Blue Ribbon's floor. The screenplay fleshes out Gartley into a philosophical ghoul, surrounded by artifacts of other cultures in his office, which serves as a stage for his statements about human existence ("Chaos abounds, my dear") and power relations ("My power has nothing to do with money. Power is energy. Power is motivation. Power is what holds things together when they would rather fly apart"). Yet the most essential portions of Hooper's additions to Gartley concern his relationship with the mangler; he states that there is "a little bit of me in that machine, a little bit of that machine in me," and that the machine "made me

what I am.” Since Englund is a canonical horror figure for having played Freddy Krueger in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise, the comment can’t help functioning as a metacommentary on stardom’s limitations. After all, though both Hooper and Englund were successful to the extent that each had a prolonged career in Hollywood, their collaborations across *Eaten Alive* (1976), *Night Terrors*, and *The Mangler* were initially regarded as critical and financial failures. Each man remains known within the film industry for one, central accomplishment, and so their fates are tied to the narratives about them, that is, to how the machine articulates and perpetuates itself.

THE HOLLYWOOD-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

The Mangler examines at an implicit level how the overlap between artistic ambition and workplace negligence became an aesthetic trait of film production in Hollywood during the 1970s and beyond. The monstrousness of the human response to industrialization comes to the fore at the point where Hollywood and the US military meet. Hooper’s career began with *Eggshells* (1969), a film he describes as being “about hippies at the end of the Vietnam War” (Cerone 1990). Vietnam was an important touchstone for Hooper, even though he never made a film directly representing the war. In *Chainsaw Massacre 2*, Chop-Top is a Vietnam veteran with a metal plate on his skull because of an injury suffered in combat. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* has been positioned by critics and scholars as being indicative of the aftermath of the US destruction of Vietnam. John Bloom, writing about the film’s production, says, “The more you learn about its making, the less it seems the invention of a screenwriter or a director or an acting company than the product of Austin itself at the end of the Vietnam era” (2004). Though Bloom means this more with regard to a newfound familiarity between legislators and filmmakers, other critics have been blunter, calling the film “a metaphoric stand-in for the slaughterhouse of the Vietnam War” (Tobias 2012). Jean Baudrillard sees the war as “a test site, a gigantic territory in which to test [America’s] arms, their methods, their power,” which Baudrillard aligns with the filmmaking methods used by Francis Ford Coppola in *Apocalypse Now* (1979): “Coppola makes his film like the Americans made war . . . , the war as entrenchment, as technological and psychedelic fantasy, the war as a succession of special effects, the war become film before ever being filmed” ([1981] 1994, 59).

Contemporary methods of waging war became indecipherable in such instances from those of Hollywood filmmaking, particularly given the prevalence of on-set accidents and deaths due to negligent protocols during special-effects sequences. The most prominent among these was, tellingly, a sequence

set during a re-creation of the Vietnam War in John Landis's segment of *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983), when the actors Vic Morrow, Myca Dinh Le, and Renee Shin-Ye Chen were killed by a helicopter that crashed during a stunt gone awry.¹⁰ *The Mangler* expands the framework of an investigation into workplace malpractice from King's story into a comprehensive theme that governs the entire narrative, with Hunton still reeling from having accidentally killed his wife and daughter in a car accident years prior.

Aside from the expansion of Gartley into a fully fledged Gothic villain, the central narrative and dialogic changes from King's story concern Hunton's background and response to having witnessed the aftermath of a grisly accident.¹¹ In "The Mangler," Hunton is married and has a daughter. King relegates the female characters to a few mentions, noting that "the women were inside, doing dishes and talking babies," and including a brief scene in which Hunton's three-year-old daughter chases a ball that Mark rolls back and forth. Later, the prose notes that "Hunton had sent his wife and daughter to a movie" (Stephen King 1978, 75–86). In *The Mangler*, Hunton's wife and daughter are nowhere to be found because they were killed in an accident years prior. Although details of the tragic event remain vague, it is clear that Hunton was driving their car when it happened ("Detective's Wife Dies in Horror Smash," a newspaper headline reads). Late in the film, as Hunton and Mark, who is the officer's brother-in-law in the film rather than his neighbor, look at newspaper clippings, Mark says: "It wasn't your fault." Hunton responds: "I was driving the car." Trying to reassure him, Mark says: "Accidents happen. People make mistakes, but they carry on." The circumstances of such negligence as they pertain to the thin line between manslaughter and murder is something that *The Mangler* interrogates in a metatextual way from its three primary subject positions: Gartley (director), Hunton (legal system), and the Blue Ribbon's female workers (actors). Gartley has so little concern for protocol—and even less concern for his employees—that even after Mrs. Frawley's death, he mutters under his breath that she was "a stupid old bitch" who was "always getting in the way." Rather than consider the ramifications of his business practices, Gartley resents that his employees refuse to literally sacrifice their bodies for his operations.

In Hooper's script, Hunton questions the law as it pertains to workplace accidents. After a broken hose scalds the face of a young worker named Annette Gillian, Hunton says to Mark: "One kid's disfigured for life. Now, that's against the law in my book." Hunton's dialogue troubles the real-world outcome from a legal perspective by questioning how, in certain cases, no one ends up being held accountable for the deaths of others. Given Hunton's guilt over his role in the deaths of his wife and daughter, the irony of his assessment is that he might

as well be talking about himself. Therefore, Hunton's dialogue works to reinforce a complex mix of reflexivity and anger over the circumstances of budgets and profit-based artistry. That Hooper had unmistakably become a part of this system over the preceding twenty years speaks to the fact that he, like many in his cohort who worked in Hollywood between 1975 and 1983 and even beyond, was guilty of overseeing productions in which near misses and questionable on-set practices jeopardized the cast's and crew's safety.¹² On *The Mangler*, a key grip was electrocuted three times during an expedited and grueling shoot in South Africa (Englund and Goldsher 2009, 11–12). Hooper acknowledged his tough behavior in an interview before the film's release: "Screaming and shouting is not normally my way of doing things, but I felt I needed to be a bit of an SOB on this film" (Shapiro 1995, 23).

Twenty years prior, shooting on a low budget in the Texas heat, Hooper and the cast and crew on *Texas Chain Saw* battled cost constraints and the elements in ways that consistently placed their lives at risk. Hooper recalls stepping in halfway through production, after Gunnar Hansen fell and nearly cut himself with the fully operational chainsaw, to say, "Excuse me, someone may get hurt" (Hooper 2014). Subsequently, the saw ran for much of the shoot "with the clutch part out of it." On another day, Marilyn Burns recalled, Hansen became so frustrated with the combination of heat and an uncooperative tube of fake blood that he actually cut Burns; later that day, Burns suffered a black eye in the scene in which she is being struck by members of Leatherface's family. In her recollection, "Tobe was standing nearby saying, 'Hit her harder! Harder!'" Hooper, responding to these stories years later, described himself as a pacifist: "I wouldn't kill a fly. Any insect" (Zinoman 2008).¹³ The self-perception of directorial intent or action as it pertains to workplace ethics has a way of getting lost when one is trying to operate within artistic and financial constraints in the Hollywood machine.

The most direct statement of this metatextual dimension within *The Mangler* relates to Gartley's deal with "the beast in the machine," for which he shows a contract to Lin Sue. That the beast remains, paradoxically, concealed within the machine and yet out in the open reinforces the underlying notion of an intangible force operating within industrial practice to stoke ambition while dissipating any clear sense of ethical action. Although any accident is in reality antithetical to successful industry practice and necessarily results in reform, *The Mangler* reconciles this certainty by offering a monstrous figure that subsists on the blood of virgin girls and ultimately cares little about the gender of its metonymic figure, only that its power remains intact. Indeed, the film concludes with Sherry taking over her uncle's business as Hunton stares on,

helplessly holding a bouquet of flowers that he intended to give her, whom he last saw recovering in a hospital bed. Now, having ambiguously assumed Gartley's former role, she towers over the Blue Ribbon as a reanimated, fresh-faced emblem of corporate power.

The underlying conception of *The Mangler* as a cumulative assessment of Hooper's career rests in the bifurcated manner in which power operates in Hollywood. On set, Hooper becomes Gartley—as a director in the era of the commercial auteur, he is a metonym for capitalistic production. Relative to Hollywood as a whole, he is Hunton, trying to combat the larger system and largely failing; he even wound up sharing traits with the women of the Blue Laundry—particularly Mrs. Frawley—after the financial failure of *The Mangler*. He is caught within a machine that has use only for what he can produce profitably. Yet he is granted enough momentary power to glimpse himself as the beast within the machine. The film's reflexive traits pertain to Hooper's simultaneously being an outsider in this system while trying, in order to maintain a functioning career, to find projects in which individual vision can intersect with commercial viability. That Hooper never found sustained success was something he acknowledged with melancholic self-awareness shortly after making *The Mangler*: “In terms of my career, I might have been better off if I was the son of a bitch people expected me to be” (Shapiro 1995, 24).

NOTES

1. After seeing *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, William Friedkin, who had broken numerous box-office records with *The Exorcist* in 1973, invited Hooper to the Universal lot. Hooper recounts that Friedkin told him, “‘Hey, kid, the film's really good. You have a sensibility. That will come in handy . . . but let's get down to the important stuff—the bullshit.’ By that he meant a career in Hollywood” (quoted in Zinoman 2008).

2. A tenth feature, *Night Terrors* (1993), was released theatrically only in Europe.

3. Although a concrete figure for the film's budget is unknown, Hooper explained that the shoot in South Africa allowed him to make a film that “look[s] like it cost \$20 million.” *Fangoria* described the film as an “under-\$10 million production,” meaning the production costs were still likely four to five times the film's total domestic gross (Shapiro 1995).

4. Although *The Mangler* became the least profitable King adaptation made to date, it followed five consecutive adaptations from 1992 through 1995 that all saw middling box-office returns.

5. King worked in an industrial laundry during college, which ties the setting to his working-class roots.

6. The overlap between the studio heads of classical Hollywood and the CEOs of corporations has been noted within Hollywood itself: the director Joseph L.

Mankiewicz once said that Louis B. Mayer was “a great executive” who could have “run General Motors as successfully as MGM” (Eyman 2009, 7).

7. To read more about the significance of this phrase and its legacy in classical Hollywood filmmaking, see the study by Schatz (2010).

8. “Trucks” was adapted as *Maximum Overdrive* (Stephen King, 1986), King’s only filmmaking effort as a writer-director. It, too, was a critical and financial failure.

9. The fusing of human and machine in relation to late-capitalist industry emerged as a theme of American cinema in the late 1980s, spanning genres and including documentaries. A few prominent examples include *RoboCop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987), *Matewan* (John Sayles, 1987), and *Roger and Me* (Michael Moore, 1989).

10. There are numerous reasons to consider this case specifically in relation to *The Mangler*; not only were Hooper and Landis contemporaries and friends (Landis appears in Hooper’s *Spontaneous Combustion* [1990]), but the ramifications for on-set industry protocol were significant and ongoing; the legal proceedings regarding Landis’s culpability in the accident were not fully resolved until almost a decade after the accident, and just before the scripting of *The Mangler* began. That Brandon Lee was killed on set during filming of *The Crow* (Alex Proyas, 1994) on March 31, 1993—during preproduction on *The Mangler*—would have made the issue of fatal, creative workplace accidents all the more relevant and topical.

11. Englund writes that the characterization of Gartley was based on a combination of Harry Truman and Arthur Bannister (Everett Sloane) in *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947) (Englund and Goldsher 2009, 220–221).

12. See the volume by Jaworzyn (2003) for a full account of such incidents.

13. The line also recalls Alfred Hitchcock’s famous remark about actors being cattle, followed by a correction: “I never said actors were cattle. What I said was all actors should be treated like cattle.”

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THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE BEGINS

J. SHEA AND NED SCHANTZ

“LOOK, GRANDPA, LOOK, LOOK,” SAYS the blood and bone artist we have come to know as Leatherface’s brother, the grave robber, Dracula, the photographer, the hitchhiker. His directive resonates throughout as into the dining room of their old home he carries his ancient relative, a near corpse, to see the show. The sight is Sally. Bound and gagged, she is the last survivor from a van of teens following the signs of Saturn to a graveyard in Texas, and beyond. Having journeyed to see whether her granddaddy’s body was disturbed after a spate of grave robberies, she instead finds herself the guest of honor in a house of cannibals. Hospitality, to put it mildly, has gone awry—a theme to which we will return. In place of her grandfather, she encounters a nightmarish reflection of her fears and appetites, another patriarch raised from the dead. The series of tableaux that unfold in this Grand Guignol dinner theater constitutes the film’s unparalleled centerpiece, and they upset the limited security of social relations, including that of moviegoing as a scene of cultural hospitality. Indeed, the episode features a series of glaring lights, some aimed directly at Sally’s face, that resemble the light of the film projector. “Look,” says the hitchhiker, but in the end it is Sally’s look we remember—when cinematographer Daniel Pearl’s camera comes at her violently in a moment reminiscent of *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Buñuel, 1929).¹ Again and again, the camera attacks until it isolates her panicked eye like some alien, bloodshot orb (fig. 17.1). Sitting in a movie theater—whether brick and mortar or drive-in—in 1974, how must spectators have felt to have vision come under such pressure? How does it feel now?

Amidst all the uproar, grotesquerie, and carnage, we single out the extreme close-up of Sally’s eyeball as the essential image of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*—not least in its formal associations with a host of orbs, including the sun and the moon—and as the lodestone of our misadventure. After Tobe Hooper’s death, we wish to return to the beginning of the beginning to scrutinize

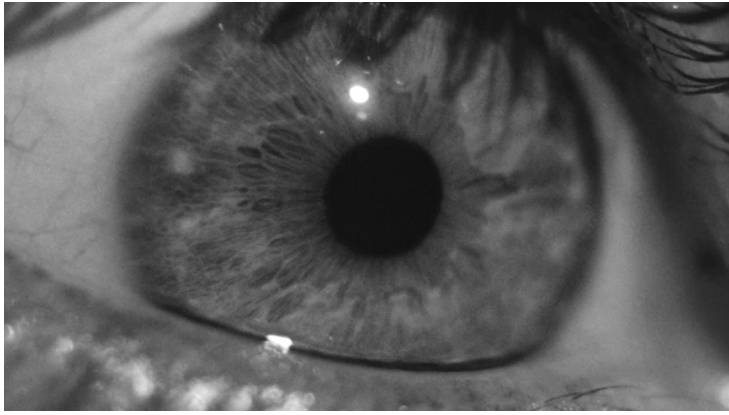


Figure 17.1. Attacking Sally's eyeball: unblinking cinematic exposure in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, Vortex / Bryanston Distributing, 1974).

our viewing process. Can we re-create the uncanny unfolding and the vague, malevolent incipience of Hooper's masterpiece in its first fifteen-odd minutes, before the chain saw roars to life, before the rest is history? Were we somehow, from the start, like Sally, like dinner, being *prepared*? Our microanalysis of the film's early sequences suggests as much—something disrupts our place in the cultural food chain. No one can say we weren't warned. And so, it begins like this:

The film which you are about to see is an account of the tragedy which befell a group of five youths, in particular Sally Hardesty and her invalid brother, Franklin. It is all the more tragic in that they were young. But, had they lived very, very long lives, they could not have expected nor would they have wished to see as much of the mad and macabre as they were to see that day. For them an idyllic summer afternoon became a nightmare.

The events of that day were to lead to the discovery of one of the most bizarre crimes in the annals of American history, the Texas Chain Saw Massacre.

With its scrolling text and authoritative voice-of-God narration, the film immediately positions itself at the crossroads of documentary and carnivalesque exploitation film. What follows promises truth based on official records, an authority reinforced by the scroll's status as text. Recall Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, in which the con man Autolycus sells monster ballads to some gullible country girls, one of whom declares, "I love a ballad in print . . . for then we are sure they are true" (act 4, scene 4, lines 296–297). This same logic justifies the film to come and looks forward to "true horror" hoaxes from the *Blair*

Witch Project (Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999) to *Catfish* (Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost, 2010). It also looks backward to the exploitation films of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s and their reliance on introductory scrolls claiming to expose some social ill or illuminate distasteful, off-limits subject matter for a curious audience unsure of its right to look.²

Such “square-ups,” as they were called, were a staple of early exploitation films and a remnant of cinema’s origins in the carnival sideshow. It is here where the term finds its roots in the cryptic carnival expression “squaring a beef” (Schaefer 1999, 72)—a phrase resonant with *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* if there ever was one. Building on the idiom of commercial exploitation as meat market, the expression may also play on two senses of “square”—the word evokes juridical implications of fair dealing or the resolution of a dispute (we had a beef; now we are square) but retains its literal, geometrical sense. In effect, the cinematic square-up is a rectangular frame shaping and containing “wrong” subject matter with right angles. Eric Schaefer tells us that the square-ups of exploitation films often included a disclaimer that the film to follow was sanctioned by an officiating body such as the police (73). Exploitation films and freak shows alike appealed to cultural authorities for legitimacy: quoting famous works of literature, from the Bible to Shakespeare, or securing the endorsement of academics and celebrities.

Texas Chain Saw’s square-up begins with a direct address to the viewing audience: “The film which you are about to see . . .” The preparation seems to invite the spectator to look, but soon the prospect grows less appealing: “But, had they lived very, very long lives, they could not have expected nor would they have wished to see as much of the mad and macabre as they were to see that day.” Why would we want to look upon what our character surrogates would never “wish” to see, had they survived to do so? What first appeared an invitation now feels like hostage taking. We might rather close our eyes. Thus, the square-up here simultaneously lures and wards off (Step right up! Stand back!)—just as the cannibal family will do. (The hitchhiker invites the youths to dinner, but the gas station attendant warns them not to go “messing around no old house.”) It also legitimizes the sights to come as an archive, situating them within the “annals” of American historical record: August 18, 1973, a day that will live in infamy.

Hooper relies on the authoritative declamation of actor John Larroquette, who was instructed to sound like Orson Welles (Bloom 2004). On one hand, this voice guarantees cultural authority. On the other, since Welles was the host of *War of the Worlds* (1938)—the most notorious radio hoax in history—his voice signals deception. Like Welles, Larroquette proves himself a misleading host, starting with the implication that everyone dies in the titular massacre; in

fact, Sally will not. As an early prototype for what Carol Clover (1992) calls the Final Girl, Sally survives in the film's narrative world (though likely not entirely intact). Equally deceiving is Larroquette's odd emphasis on the discovery of the massacre in the final sentence, which seems to position the "events of that day" as a mere prelude to the revelation. When the scroll runs out, we expect to see what is unearthed—and Marcus Nispel's 2003 remake fulfills those expectations, following the text with the forensic photography of the square-up's officiating police. And while first-time audiences might believe something similar will follow in Hooper's *Texas Chain Saw*, that belief is upended. It is under these misleading auspices that we encounter one of the most iconic opening scenes in horror history.

It begins in total blackness—degree zero of all visual culture—and the sounds of digging and of prying open a casket are easily mistaken for police work.³ Eight blinding flashes erupt with an uncanny shearing sound, attacking eye and ear in the first of many moments when the film anticipates Sally's climactic experience. Dizzying shifts in focus destabilize our vantage point. Far from confirming our expectations of a crime scene, the visual field baffles our relationship to the camera, leaving us unsure of who we are or what we are doing. Sometimes we stare into an eyelike flashbulb and other times at what it illuminates: nails, teeth, cowboy boots, eye sockets, and the profile of a grinning skull, flesh oozing off the bone. The crosscutting divides us between the position of the corpse and that of the photographer. And when we are aligned with the photographer, is he an official investigator or some less legitimate exhumers? Once we see these gruesome images, we cannot look away. The flashes of light on dark linger on our retinas and in our minds, disabling horror's escape hatch. No eyelid or hand can block the afterimage; no swiveling neck can evade it. Gone is the safety of spectatorial distance and the ability to avert our eyes when things are too scary. Although things are barely under way, many rules of viewing have already been suspended.

Another would-be authority speaks up—a radio newscast—and it links suggestively with this nighttime scene: "Grave robbing in Texas is this hour's top news story." The voice bridges the blackness, and we see the next image tightly framed against the rising sun: the oozing head of a corpse (likely the one seen before), a sun flare below its empty eye socket, its jaws parted in a rictus of absurd laughter. The first of many mocking corpses (the dinner scene is full of them)—this image will come to mirror Sally, for the face here resembles hers at the film's end, when she escapes in the back of a pickup truck—head blood-soaked and skeletal-looking, mouth agape, laughing hysterically. The camera pulls back to reveal what the radio describes in less explicit terms: "Officers outside the small rural community of Newt, Texas, discovered there what appeared



Figure 17.2. Sleeping under the sun: disjointed man spread and backward head in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, Vortex / Bryanston Distributing, 1974).

to be a grisly work of art: the remains of a badly decomposed body wired to a large monument.” Highlighted by lens flares, a phallic monument penetrates the “decomposed body” from below and bursts through its belt line. The corpse holds a skull, hovering mouth open, above the erect headstone, as if the corpse is getting head from this severed head.⁴ Towering in the frame, legs akimbo in a disjointed man spread, the figure commands the scene in a grotesque parody of authority (fig. 17.2). At the same time, it decomposes before our eyes: gooey and hairy, flaps of flesh flickering in the wind. Presiding revoltingly, death—more like the “Grim Seeper”—cannot be contained. As the later mortification of Sally comes to suggest, death will take over the living in surprising ways. But the grisly work of art may not be the most important thing to see in this shot. Counterpoised to the stillness of death, cemetery dust blows in the wind while a palpable Texas heat radiates off the landscape and through visible lens flares. Mirage-like and hallucinatory in effect, the film here and throughout feels bone dry and hot to the touch, its solar preoccupations strong enough to compete with its necrophilia.⁵

It is in fact straight to a shot of the sun that we now proceed for the credit sequence, though that sun is not easy to recognize in infrared, appearing only as a terrible inferno that rages throughout this sequence. The radio continues: “Sheriff Jesus Maldonado refused to give details of the ghoulish case, and said only that he did have strong evidence linking the crime to elements outside the state. Area residents have reportedly converged upon the cemetery fearing the remains of relatives have been removed.” Finally, the police do arrive on the scene, but they are the ineffectual, misleading authorities of the kind that Andrew Tudor says have populated horror cinema since the 1960s (1989,

113–115). Sheriff Maldonado is, of course, wrong. While the film will go on to suggest that Texas is merely a microcosm of global, cosmic violence, the source of the grave robbing, and the string of murders to come, prove to be local. And one wonders whether the five youth would have ventured into the land of the dead in the first place had they not been assured that the threat was elsewhere or had not been summoned by the siren call of the radio. The scope of the report broadens: “Oil storage units continue to burn out of control at the huge Texaco refinery near the Texas-Louisiana border.” Striking here is the disjunction between the voice and the continued image of solar flares. The radio prompts us to view refineries in flames, and many viewers assume that what they see is aerial photography of the border burning—or blood running through veins. Before we realize the trap of the voice, the image seems a veritable Rorschach, an invitation to free associate.

In fact, *Texas Chain Saw* crosses over here to the cosmic with these blood-tinged solar flares, and once again we stare into the light. Flash after flash, flare after flare, *Texas Chain Saw* is a film that would have us eyeball the sun for answers, only to ask us—as Jerry does of Pam, the film’s resident astrol-ogist—“Do you believe all that shit your lady is hawking me?” Pam explains that the mad world is under the influence of Saturn in retrograde. (Retrogradation, she clarifies in the script, is merely an optical illusion, the perception that bodies are moving backward in relation to the sun.) It is not just that the eye deceives; it is that light—the precondition for vision—blinds and burns. “There’s a light,” Sally will say hopefully when she and Franklin misidentify the cannibals’ house as a sanctuary, but they move forward, like we viewers before the flickering screen, like moths to the flame.

The shot of the sun pulls us in and then dissolves onto something else. Initially appearing larger in the frame, this new object is actually much smaller than the sun: a dead armadillo, upside down in the road. Besides confounding scale at the level of perception, which labors to distinguish the far from the small, this shot introduces animal (including human) topology and its very high stakes—for spatial relations determine almost everything. Belly-up is not the optimal position for an animal with an armored back. But under the sun, which knows no up or down, front or back, the anything-but-arbitrary pragmatics of bodily orientation show their environmental specificity. Something of a dinosaur in appearance, the armadillo has evolved defenses that are useless against the highway threat. Behind this roadkill, a van pulls up, out of focus. Itself a kind of armored creature, the vehicle contains our protagonists, who could not have entered the film in a less privileged fashion—the juxtaposition suggesting, perhaps, that human exceptionalism will be tenuous at best.

We first see Kirk, a blond young man who, in another movie, would be

a clear candidate for the role of hero. (He will be Leatherface's first victim, summarily dispatched.) Kirk prepares a makeshift ramp for a more interesting character: the wheelchair-bound, full-bladdered Franklin, whom Kirk wheels down to take a leak as the van's women look on. With visible distaste, Kirk hands Franklin a can labeled "amphora," a reference to containers for wine and grain in ancient Greece; its use implicates the pissing Franklin in the pollution of food as a category well before the cannibalism to come. As he fumbles with the can, repugnance fills his face. Under the weight of all this disgust and propelled by the impossibly strong wind of a passing truck, Franklin careens down an embankment. Shot in a number of cuts, in varying degrees of close-up, the descent seems interminable, even repetitive. When he finally hits bottom, as leaky as the exhumed corpses, as upside down as the armadillo, his wheelchair exoskeleton rolls on top of him in a final indignity—an inauspicious start, to say the least.

After the journey resumes, the van arrives at a graveyard, apparently the site of the recent disturbance. Locals are hanging out in surprising numbers, presenting the first social scene the group must navigate. When Sally announces, "My granddaddy is buried here," the explanation for her presence—this claim of a legitimate right to visit—triggers a friendly response that, for all its politeness, feels a bit too much, as if her hosts are patronizing her. The shaky welcome begins with a man in the back of a pickup truck who refers her to the sheriff—upon which we cut not to a local lawman but to a drooling drinker sitting back in an old tire, looking on impassively. Spilling beer and, soon, information, he appears as a viewer surrogate, and the comparison is less than flattering. But he remains a more legitimate onlooker than we do simply for being there, a different kind of local authority. A disturbing question to viewers hovers over our sense of entitlement to look: where is your granddaddy buried?

In an arresting shot, our surrogate falls backward toward the camera in tight close-up, his head resting on the ground upside down (fig. 17.3). Uncorking a slow, laughing monologue intercut with shots of Franklin stuck in the van and Sally walking toward her grandfather's grave, he asserts his status as a witness: "Things happen hereabout they don't tell about. I see things. You see, they say it's just an old man, talking. You laugh at an old man. There's them that laughs and knows better." As the only one listening, Franklin now takes on the role of audience surrogate—a function that will be passed along as a kind of relay—for the film relentlessly stages variations on the problem of viewing. A shot of Sally occurs right when the old man says, "I see things," insinuating a connection between her graveyard business and whatever part of "the mad and the macabre" we imagine our drunken surrogate to be privy to. At odds with his perspective, it is hard not to feel that we are the ones upside down—with



Figure 17.3. "I see things": authority and the gaze turned upside down in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, Vortex / Bryanston Distributing, 1974).

additional disorientation immediately to follow. Now farther from the camera, Sally keeps walking. Mismatched with the image, her voice comes in to report that the grave appears untouched—speaking, we soon realize, from the other side of an ellipsis, for the group has already departed from the site in the van. Approaching the grave with her body while her voice rides away, Sally comes and goes at the same time, yet another bifurcation of the viewer.

No sooner have we resituated ourselves on the "idyllic summer afternoon drive" than noses begin to crinkle: "What's that?" "What's that smell?" Here the olfactory suspense resolves quickly when Franklin's face lights up with recognition: "That's the old slaughterhouse!"—though the camera remains inside the van. Visual withholding persists as Franklin details the family connection to the meat industry and describes how beef is made: "They bash 'em in the head with a big sledgehammer." It is only in sync with Pam's protesting ("Oh, that's awful!") that the film finally delivers a corresponding image: a horribly sick cow, drooling in profile. This is no point-of-view shot, but an image aimed directly at the viewer—and if we observe a motif of drooling mammals, then, by association with the drunk in the graveyard, this sick cow also becomes our surrogate, now totally abject.

Hooper once reported that the idea for the film began as the image of a cow butchering a human.⁶ While the man-cow Leatherface is the film's fullest rendering of that vision, we can see the reversal being prepared in the feedlot sequence we now enter—for our eyes place us among the cattle, panning past packed bodies until we watch the van drive by from within the pen. Moos take over the dialogue. Then, in two brief shots, cows look at us. Has the reversal already occurred? These are the film's first leatherfaces. The bovine gazes remain inscrutable, the darker faces truly abyssal, but the rumination of confronting the animal Other ends before it begins as we cut back into the van.

Too fast to process, these registrations accumulate in a way that defeats the thematic. Meaning does not stack up so much as implode—a bolt to the brain. Franklin has a good sound effect for this: “BOOM!-schupp! BOOM!-schupp! BOOM!-schupp! BOOM!-schupp! BOOM!-schupp!” Yes, he is mimicking the air gun of mechanized slaughter, but we are to the film as the cow is to the gun. Meanwhile, enthusiasm has overtaken Franklin like demonic possession, anticipating the wild abandon of the dinner scene. When, by the third boom, Sally talks over him, her plea “I like meat, please change the subject” adds noise as much as sense, even as it maintains a stubbornly carnivorous taste.

Finally stopping his air-gun impression when Pam piles on the disapproval, Franklin complains: “Oh man, it’s hot in here.” Disagreeable conversation, close quarters, and heat—all exacerbated for us by tight camerawork: how is the drive going so far? The van confines the group like cattle in a pen. Not yet a nightmare, the trip remains far from idyllic, to use Larroquette’s term from the opening scroll—yet another false expectation. Idyllic, moreover, in the Bakhtinian sense, means not just highly pleasant, but also “inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers lived and where one’s children and their children will live” (Bakhtin [1975] 1981, 225). Franklin and Sally’s family is from the area, but they themselves live elsewhere and arrive as strangers—and the truck wind, the rank stench, and the baking sun signal that the landscape responds with hostility, as if they were trespassing.

The travelers spy the hitchhiker. Sally sees him first—fittingly, since she too becomes a roadside refugee when the shelter of two trucks saves her at the film’s close. That the stakes now exceed mere convenience, too, is underlined by Kirk’s response: “Oh yeah, man, pick him up. He’ll asphyxiate out there.” When the group decides to pull over—overriding the objection of Pam, who finds him “weird-looking”—the encounter with their remarkable passenger will be their only turn as hosts in the entire film, and lest we doubt that something important is about to happen, the buildup is tremendous. Until they pull over, we never see the hitchhiker as they discuss their decision. Even once he is inside, our first shot is of the group staring at him as Franklin declares, “I think we’ve just picked up Dracula.” Before that, we glimpse him only at a tantalizing remove, perpendicular to the highway in one of the camera’s several austere retreats. Heavy with sky, the shot presents not hopeful openness but, again, a dreadful exposure. The hitchhiker stands at the far left of the frame, bisected at the torso by the low horizon. Beige pants matching the dry fields, and a green shirt echoing the trees in the distance, he remains part of the landscape, a decidedly local element. But viewers straining to confirm Pam’s impression may indeed make out something unusual about him—a certain looseness, in his long hair, his dangling bag, and in the flailing of his limbs. Just what the hitchhiker gets

loose from will become important in a moment. Jaunty guitar music begins to play (Roger Bartlett's "Fool for a Blonde"), a tonal insertion that does more than contrast with the harrowing experience to follow, for we will learn it complements the new passenger's rare capacity for enjoyment.

But first, all eyes on him, he makes his long-awaited appearance, and he does look a fright: stringy black hair, ragged T-shirt, gigantic wine-stain birthmark across his face. More exposed inside the van than out, this fish out of water holds his mouth open and pulled to the side as if he had been hooked. But as his manner and behavior unfold, a highly specific—and challenging—dynamic begins to emerge. His approach to the encounter has something child-like about it. He is eager, experimental, resourceful. A social and emotional optimist, the hitchhiker engages the group with high hopes that may well be naïve and will certainly be dashed. One thing he does seem to know is that hospitality demands exchange, and he produces a rich catalogue of offerings, material and otherwise, in what becomes an extraordinary game of show-and-tell.

"My family's always been in meat," he shares, as if establishing his bona fides, and soon circulates some personal photos from the slaughterhouse. Franklin warms to the topic, his earlier air-gun imitation echoed as the hitchhiker, fist slamming in palm, informs him that the sledge is better. Conversationally, they form a pair apart from the others. His expertise meeting interest, the hitchhiker expounds on his theme, launching into the subject of headcheese—the description all the more graphic when he starts to act the process out, this time with his own skull playing the part of the dead cow's cheesed head. And here, while convention demands disgust from even the most ravenous meat eaters, the hitchhiker and Franklin get carried away with mutual enjoyment: "It's really good! D'ya like it?" "Oh, yeah, I like it. It's good!"

Pam asks them to talk about something else. Kirk tells Franklin he is "making everybody sick" and returns the photos to the hitchhiker. Heads turn away. Shame descends. The headcheese boys have spoken inappropriately, overly enjoyed the conversation—and the social verdict follows. Theirs are "the humiliating consequences of not being looked at and of losing the attention of the other" (Tomkins 1995, 148)—the counterpoint to Franklin's prior spectacle of urination. Despite the indirectness of Kirk's criticism, picking on Franklin instead of the guest, the hitchhiker's face falls, and he returns the rejected photos to his bag. Co-offender Franklin looks down at his knife in close-up.

But it is hard to inhibit their resilient passenger. When we immediately cut back to the hitchhiker, his face is again wide open with interest and pleasure at the sight of Franklin's knife, which he quickly grabs. Looking up, as if to be sure of his audience, he giggles—and digs the knife into his palm. He certainly has their attention now. As mirror neurons fire wildly, both in and out of the film,

we cut back and forth between mouths gaping in horror and the hitchhiker's own mouth open in an ecstasy of disinhibition. This riot mirrors the climax at the dinner table, where a guest is again outnumbered by hosts, again opposed by a sea of howling faces. In the moment, the density of this act—as gesture, as demonstration, as self-harm—floods the scene with affect that is itself a contribution, even if one hard to recognize. Restraint comes loose—a liberation. Still putting on a show, still giving, the hitchhiker even manages to affirm the quality of Franklin's knife, which cuts just fine.

The van's denizens are no longer in a receiving mood, however, and the hitchhiker's continued efforts grow more strained. They don't much care to know that his straight-edge razor, alarmingly produced from his boot, is also "a good knife." They aren't much interested in having their pictures taken—except, hilariously, for Sally, who smiles quietly at the idea from the front seat, but not in a way that deflects the hitchhiker from settling his camera on Franklin. And they have no desire to join their guest for dinner when, in the dwindling hope of getting dropped off at his house, he resorts to a direct invitation. It is a resonant offer, appealing not just to the principle of reciprocity, in which hosts should become guests in turn, but to an uncanny fact about the situation: these hosts have been guests all along—their van a mobile hospitality inversion unit. Wherever their granddaddies are buried, these youths do not live hereabouts, and the hitchhiker does. Such is the nested quality of hospitality that the roles of host and guest can switch with any shift in scale.

Fed up, the hitchhiker engineers an explosive exit that concludes the beginning of the film. In direct violation of hospitality's gift economy, he demands payment for Franklin's photo, but to no avail. Instead, he burns it before a captive audience in one final show. It is this pyrotechnic display, ignited by gunpowder no less, that situates the film's understanding of cinema as an elemental art of fire in which illumination ultimately threatens to engulf the eye in flames. As the hitchhiker proceeds amid the chaos to slice Franklin's arm, we hear again the shearing sound from the grave-robbing photography scene. The cinematic cut has been literalized without losing its power to change where you are, for the hitchhiker's cut authorizes a camera cut to outside the van. They pull over and he gets out. He kicks the van, sticks his tongue out, smears the side with blood, and does a little dance: head back, arms waving, trotting after them. The group may not have been mocked back at the cemetery, but they sure are now, and to the extent that we also reject the hitchhiker, so are we. The group won't notice the blood until later. Is it a sign, and if so, can we read it? Franklin will ask whether the hitchhiker was trying to scare them, and this raises the question less of the sign's meaning than of its direction, its target audience. A warning or a threat to the travelers it may be, or equally a message to others:

in some way or for some reason, “This is the van”—perhaps even “a bad van.” In any case, the van has been marked. After the cadaver statue and before the bone sculptures to come, the van’s side—the travelers’ exoskeleton, their wall and means of exclusion—has been turned into the hitchhiker’s canvas. As the beginning of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* comes to an end, onward they drive within a grisly work of art: mobile composition in blood and metal, bearers of cryptic signs, victims of their own broken hospitality and of unblinking cinematic exposure.

NOTES

1. For more on this connection, see the study by Worland (2007, 219–220).
2. Examples include Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932), Sam Newfield’s *She Shoulda Said “No!”* (1949), and Ed Wood’s *Glen or Glenda* (1953).
3. First-time audiences often misinterpret the hitchhiker’s labored breath and groaning as some green officer’s disgust, and the film’s famous series of camera flashes as official documentation. It is only some ten minutes later—after we meet the hitchhiker, hear his voice, and learn of his predilection for the Polaroid—that the film confirms what it merely hints at in its first daylit image: that audiences were looking through the lens of a very different kind of photographer. The man with the camera (hitchhiker as Hooper surrogate) is not a serve-and-protect authority, but the creative force behind the “grisly work of art” described later in a radio broadcast.
4. And so begins Hooper’s cavalcade of visual puns, culminating in the dinner scene’s head lamps and arm chairs.
5. Indeed, the corpse statue, combined with neighboring monoliths, may constitute a kind of sundial, a harbinger of cryptic temporalities.
6. Hooper (2014): “I had an experience in a restaurant one time where there was a large trolley with beef being carved up, and I just transposed different images onto it. Like, what if there was a nice little cow there with a bowtie and a knife carving up humans. I was a vegetarian for a couple of years after that.”

TOBE HOOPER AND THE AMERICAN TWILIGHT

CHRISTOPHER SHARRETT

I RECALL MY FIRST SCREENING of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* in the autumn of 1974, when I was living in Philadelphia, now a place that is long ago, far away, and almost totally desecrated by gentrification. The ads for this film looked interesting, but I was a wary of the hype that presented the film more or less as a documentary. (It is “based on fact” if we accept that its influence is the Ed Gein cannibalism-murder case of the 1950s, which also is the foundation of *Psycho* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1960].) I left the theater not “scared” (I had long since found out that people in everyday life, not works of fiction, were what frightened me), but shaken. I thought that what I had seen was indeed a step further in the advancement of the horror film. As I walked down the Ben Franklin Parkway to the place that was my home at that time, I mulled over the film. I felt that it had something in common with H. P. Lovecraft’s notion of cosmic horror, a horror that refuses all reason and points to the ultimate, meaningless void. The film begins with archival images of solar fire behind the opening credits and concludes with Leatherface’s mad dance, alone on a highway at dawn, as the endless screams of Sally vanish in an abrupt cut to nothingness.

In a short time, it struck me how important a film *Texas Chain Saw* is. The film became part of my doctoral studies, my first essay on it, written in 1979 and now immortalized, I suppose, on Wikipedia. This film, directed by Tobe Hooper—whose name I immediately noted, jotting him down as a person to follow—gives us something both material and metaphysical, an image of a nation and world careening into total madness (and the indifference of the universe, per Lovecraft?) while also providing a quick, lunatic survey of American history, the reasons why we became what we are. Robin Wood and Tony Williams looked into this in their seminal study of horror *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (1979); they were soul mates without me knowing it.¹

I am sure that my being unnerved by Hooper’s film could have happened



Figure 18.1. Original one-sheet for *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, Vortex / Bryanston Distributing, 1974).

only in the film's moment, even as the film continues to shock. In 1974, my father left my mother after forty years of marriage, bursting whatever bubble I still had about family and home. But there were other things, on a larger and very consequential scale: Nixon left office that August after a crybaby speech to his staff, since he was facing impeachment and a trial (the possibility of the latter erased by his craven, corrupt successor, Gerald Ford), all of it assuring the members of the conscious public that American power was contemptible. The United States more or less ended its butchery in Southeast Asia in 1974, but

butchery would continue elsewhere: the first oil “crisis” had begun the previous year, causing a rage in the populace that would sanction new military incursions in the Middle East. There was so much more.

Tobe Hooper became a poet of the American twilight, of the dead American Dream warned about by any number of artists, but emphatically by Hooper and his soul mates George A. Romero, Wes Craven, and not a few others. As I have noted elsewhere (Sharrett 2004, 2017), Hooper immediately lets us know that his concerns are broad and deep: as the credits roll at the opening of *Texas Chain Saw*, we hear radio transmissions informing us of catastrophe after catastrophe. The banal cruelties then start to unspool: the ignored road-kill; the scorn aimed at the fat kid brother, Franklin; the careless handling of his wheelchair as he urinates. Disparate, seemingly unrelated images push the story into darker territory: Sally’s interest in astrology (making her ask questions about “Saturn in retrograde”); the appearance of the hitchhiker; the shots of cattle slavering in the boiling sunlight; out of nowhere, John Henry Faulk, a prophet-martyr of the Cold War. We see buildings consistent with Hooper’s long-standing interest in creepy architecture: the crumbling mansion, with its nineteenth-century American Gothic associations; the clapboard house, with its abandoned, camouflaged cars, the swing set in the yard. The arrival of Leatherface and the rest of his demented family is incredibly apposite to our history, with the typical hectoring (“Look what your brother did to that door!”), the demeaning of the vulnerable because of “career” failures (“You’re just a cook!”), or the inflating of reputations (the talk about Grandpa being the best in the slaughter business).

So Hooper offers perceptive observations about us and this nation. But is he a social critic to rank with, say, George A. Romero, whose zombie films, along with *The Crazies* (1973), *Hungry Wives* (1971; aka *Jack’s Wife* [1972] and *Season of the Witch* [1973]), *Martin* (1977), and several others, amount to the most radical art ever offered within independent genre film? Perhaps not, but Hooper faced the kinds of resistances, including personal problems, confronting other radical artists such as Larry Cohen and Wes Craven in the post-1960s horror genre. Filmmakers need to make a living and to be given working budgets large enough to allow for unfettered expression. But there are always problems with having money thrown at you. Craven made two remarkable films (*Last House on the Left* [1972] and *The Hills Have Eyes* [1977]) before creating two lucrative Hollywood franchises (*A Nightmare on Elm Street* [1984–2010] and *Scream* [1996–2011]) both of which became inscribed in pop culture, the first offering some thoughts about the family and the home, the second mostly a postmodern exercise. Like all franchises, both began to look tired and hackneyed very quickly, but Freddy remains relevant as a reminder that the monster

of our times isn't the Wolfman or Dracula, but the psychotic child killer, the abuser-murderer representative of the ill will of the community.²

Cohen gave us *It's Alive* (1974) and its first sequel (1978), *God Told Me To* (1976), *Q: The Winged Serpent* (1982), *The Stuff* (1985)—and I will include among his horror films *Bone* (1972) and *The Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover* (1977), which contain key elements of the horror film, the former a Godard-like experiment about race in America, the second, as Robin Wood said, “the most intelligent political film ever to come out of Hollywood” (2003, 95). And he made the most important entries in the blaxploitation cycle: *Black Caesar* and *Hell Up in Harlem* (both 1973). Larry Cohen made significant contributions, mostly unacknowledged save for a book by Tony Williams ([1996] 2014), to early television and the mainstream cinema. His death, which produced important obituaries (as did Romero's, Craven's, and Hooper's), at least brought Cohen to the public mind: I suspect he was mostly unknown to, or forgotten by, most audiences.³

My point is that Hooper, like these other men, was constrained by money, his greatness hampered by money issues—although his first masterpiece was as low-rent as one could imagine. Still, that kind of cinema, with its intelligence and wit, may thrive precisely because of its status in its day, a “poverty row” piece of lowbrow drivel never to be taken seriously except by a few nuts who like to overthink such things. Romero was indefatigable, both working in Hollywood, with its necessary concessions, and going back on his own, always persevering. Craven wasn't a sellout as much as someone ready to compromise—Freddy saved a not-bad studio in the process. Cohen wanted to remain on his own, but when he genuinely needed assistance, he also went to Hollywood. By the 1980s, Hollywood had essentially become a set of financing agencies, but Cohen went with no trace of greed.

Hooper, made of more fragile personal stuff, was at times unable to discern weak projects. When money was thrown at him, he for the most part produced work where he was almost unrecognizable, *Poltergeist* (1982) being the most obvious example. But when he got hold of the right material, he was the equal to the colleagues he joins now in death (all dead within a three-year period, almost a cruel cosmic erasure). He followed *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* with *Eaten Alive* (1976), a film strangely the inverse of *Texas Chain Saw*, about an old hotel in a swamp (hotels/motels immediately conjure *Psycho*). The hotel and swamp are shot on a stage, with multicolored lights giving the set a remarkably bilious and presentational quality. A young prostitute⁴ fleeing anal rape in a whorehouse seeks refuge in the hotel. The whorehouse madam is played by Carolyn Jones, a distinguished actor for decades who arrived at fame as Morticia on the TV sitcom *The Addams Family* (1964–1966), about a family whose

members think they are monsters. (Their TV counterpart was *The Munsters* [1964–1966], about monsters who think and act like the characters on *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* [1952–1966]—these shows struck me then as now as dead on arrival.) This is lighthearted fare, but Hooper, for one, noted that we had to imagine the family as nothing but monstrous. (In interviews, he spoke of Thanksgiving dinners with “people who hated each other.”) We assume, without much evidence, that the young prostitute of *Eaten Alive* is fleeing her family. Before the madam appears, we hear the words “Name’s Buck and I’m rarin’ to fuck” as the camera shows a man, his midregion in tight close-up, opening his belt buckle; it is an utterly extraordinary scene, acted by Robert England, who a few years later will be Freddy Krueger. Buck wants to sodomize her, she refuses, and the madam fires her, making her run, Gretel-like, into the swamp and the hotel, where a madman named Judd, played by the decorated World War II veteran Neville Brand, hacks her to pieces with a pitchfork and feeds her to a crocodile.

Brand’s presence creates significant intertext. He is thought of as ranking just behind Audie Murphy as the most decorated soldier of the war (not accurate), and like Murphy, he was made a movie actor as his reward. Both men fell into addiction, Murphy dying an early death. Here, Brand plays an utter madman—his decorative military souvenirs reminding us of the refrain that a fine line separates heroes and madmen.

Eaten Alive falls apart because of Hooper having left the set after disputes with producers, the kind of habit that made his career difficult but spoke to his integrity. The film was to have no happy ending, the heroism of Judd/Brand (and the valorization of the military) made sport of by Hooper’s mise-en-scène. The film’s accomplishments are visible: heterosexual intercourse always seen as prostitution (and had Hooper seen *Salò: The 120 Days of Sodom* [Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975] by this time?), the domicile less a sanctuary for the tormented in modern America than it was in Dickens’s London, the military producing madmen. (At the time, I recalled a protest button from the sixties reading: “The Marine Corps Makes Oswalds.”)

Salem’s Lot (1979), part of Hooper’s television work, is to my mind the best Stephen King adaptation, although I do not by any means dismiss *The Shining*, the “epic horror film” (as then advertised) about the monstrous family, making the poster blurb fully legitimate as we observe Kubrick’s discerning, intellectual acuity, the amazing scope of the film even with its tiny cast.

Hooper saw what was important about *Salem’s Lot*: not only the terrible house but also the terrible town. Indeed, this “New Jerusalem” says much about the new golden land, America itself. It is a place thoroughly evil, although the suggestions of pedophilia were modified for television. Even so, the repulsion-attraction that



Figure 18.2. The Monster wearing a Frankenstein's Monster mask in *The Funhouse* (Tobe Hooper, Universal, 1981).

the writer Ben Mears has for the rotting Marsten House, where, in the words of the Wikipedia entry for the novel, Mears had a “bad experience,” is explainable only as a sexual attack. In the film, Mears stumbles through a description of his experience at the Marsten mansion when talking to his former teacher. The vampire’s emissary, Straker (the always-remarkable James Mason), is the intruder in the town, the suspect “queer” about whom “people are talking.” Barlow (the fascinating Reggie Nalder), modeled on F. W. Murnau’s Count Orlock, is a pure monster who doesn’t speak but growls (see chap. 7, fig. 7.2); he is single-minded in his destruction of the heterosexual bourgeois community—his first violent act is to smash together the skulls of the Petrie couple. The town will mostly vanish as Ben and the young Mark, now “queered,” are left on their own, trying to kill the vampires without good prospects.

Hooper’s projects would be hit-or-miss until his end, his innate pessimism often running afoul of producer’s aims. There were notable accomplishments, such as *Lifeforce* (1985), based on the Colin Wilson novel *The Space Vampires* (1976), which is to say, since Wilson was a Lovecraft aficionado, in the realm of the Cthulhu Mythos. This alien-invasion film is despairing even with a somewhat compromised ending; the aliens visit upon London near-total devastation, recalling the screenwriter Nigel Kneale’s masterpiece *Quatermass and the Pit* (both the BBC [1958–1959] and Hammer [1967] adaptations). I mentioned the cosmic horror essential to *Texas Chain Saw*’s nullity. Here, that horror is a bit more literal, with the predictable, too-glossy set pieces found in the larger-budget films that seemed to hamper Hooper. Yet his sense of “end times” is visible here, in science fiction; the genre became radicalized in the 1980s, but *Lifeforce* is seldom accounted a contribution to the process.

There were modest films, such as *The Funhouse* (1981), which has the same

scale but not the fervor of *Texas Chain Saw*. Still, Hooper returns to his essential concern: the perversity of the family and its deformation of the nation itself. It is instructive that the “freak” wears a Frankenstein’s Monster mask. The tormented brother knows that his real kin includes this image, a monster who is actually a saint, or at least of far greater value than the normal people. Frankenstein’s Monster is the cinema’s most obvious incarnation of the Other, the thing mistaken for evil by an unthinking civilization.

Although tempted by others for over a decade, Hooper refused to make a franchise out of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. Then, in 1986, he saw a reason to revisit that story—as satire. The cannibal clan is now a group of entrepreneurs mirroring the ethos of the Reagan era. Dennis Hopper’s born-again Texas Ranger is a response, quite obviously, to the dreadful triumph of the church-state union that occurred under the Reagan reaction. Chop-Top, the brother who returned from Vietnam totally insane, with a prominent steel plate making up half his skull, might be the cinema’s best accounting of what really happens to “our boys” in combat, as some feel compelled (out of bad conscience?) to greet them with “thank you for your service.” The cannibal clan is now entrepreneurial, like everyone else—although they make short work of their competition, the spoiled yuppies who show their basic savagery during football weekends. I’ve always thought that the amusement park that is the cannibals’ lair, based as it is on Texas myth and history, is Hooper commenting on some of the critical literature that appeared after the first *Chain Saw*. A mural showing Davy Crockett’s last stand at the Alamo falls apart under Lefty/Hopper’s prodding, giving us a cascade of bloody guts. It is a remarkably discerning, intelligent moment.

Hooper was as aware of the end of the American utopian aspiration as Romero, his greatest colleague. His ability to realize his visions fully was more limited than Romero’s, but what he did achieve is remarkable. His condemnations of the family, the town, and the nation are uncompromised and unrelenting. When we look at *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* alone, we have a vision of America as self-created inferno where the “decent values” of the nation’s self-image have revealed their true face.

NOTES

1. See also other relevant works by Wood (1986) and Williams ([1996] 2015).
2. Although Freddy becomes a comedian so quickly that he totally ruins his early relevance.
3. Cohen was also one of the early drafters of a script for *Salem’s Lot* (Earnshaw 2014a, 17). He eventually made the sequel, *A Return to Salem’s Lot* (1987).
4. In keeping with the usage of the time, and the context of the film, we have opted to stick with this term over “sex worker.”

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CROSS-REFERENCED TOBE HOOPER FILMOGRAPHY

FEATURE FILMS

EGGSHELLS: AN AMERICAN FREAK ILLUMINATION

1969

Writers: Kim Henkel, Tobe Hooper | Producers: David L. Ford, Tobe Hooper, Raymond O'Leary | Music: n/a | Editing: Robert Elkins, Tobe Hooper | Cinematography: Tobe Hooper | Release Date: 1969

Cross-references: DeGiglio-Bellemare (affect, avant-garde, masochism), Williams (counterculture, avant-garde), Woofter (disaffected youth)

PETER, PAUL AND MARY: THE SONG IS LOVE

1970, 1971

Writer: Fred Miller | Producers: Richard Kidd, Robert Collinson, Fred Miller | Music: Peter Yarrow, Noel Paul Stookey, Mary Travers | Editing: Tobe Hooper, Robert Collinson | Cinematography: Tobe Hooper, Ron Perryman, Richard Kidd, Gary Pickle | 1970, Trio Concerts Incorporated | Release Date: April 4, 1971, PBS

Cross-references: introduction (antiwar protest, artistic freedom, entertainment industry), Dodson (masculinity)

THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE

1974

Writers: Kim Henkel, Tobe Hooper | Producers: Kim Henkel, Tobe Hooper, Jay Parsley, Richard Saenz | Music: Tobe Hooper, Wayne Bell | Editing: Sallye Richardson, Larry Carroll | Cinematography: Daniel Pearl | Release Date: October 1, 1974, Vortex / Bryanston Distributing

Cross-references: Cherry (Gothic tropes), DeGiglio-Bellemare (avant-garde), Dodson (masculinity), Lowenstein (aging), Sharrett (apocalypticism, cosmic horror, family), Shea and Schantz (documentary, hoax, hospitality, photography), Williams (counterculture), Woofter (disaffected youth, human exceptionalism)

EATEN ALIVE

1976

Writers: Kim Henkel, Alvin L. Fast, Mardi Rustam | Producers: Alvin L. Fast, Larry Huly, Robert Kantor, Mardi Rustam, Mohammed Rustam, Samir Rustam | Music: Wayne Bell, Tobe Hooper | Editing: Michael Brown | Cinematography: Robert Carmico | Release Date: September 23, 1977

Cross-references: Cherry (southern Gothic), Sharrett (family), Thorn (human exceptionalism, animal horror), Williams (Old Dark House)

THE DARK

1979

Directors: John “Bud” Cardos, Tobe Hooper (uncredited) | Writer: Stanford Whitmore | Producers: John “Bud” Cardos, Dick Clark, Edward L. Montoro, Derek Power | Music: Roger Kellaway | Editing: Martin Dreffke | Cinematography: John Arthur Morrill | Release Date: April 27, 1979, Film Ventures International

Cross-reference: Williams (production context [also in notes])

SALEM’S LOT

1979

Writer: Paul Monash | Producers: Stirling Silliphant, Richard Kobritz, Anna Cottle | Music: Harry Sukman | Editing: Carroll Sax | Cinematography: Jules Brenner | Airdate: November 17–24, 1979, CBS

Cross-references: Cherry (Universal horror, Gothic), Dodson (cuckoldry), Lowenstein (aging, vampirism), Sharrett (family, community), Williams (avant-garde, intertextuality, melodrama, Hitchcock), Woofter (disaffected youth)

THE FUNHOUSE

1981

Writer: Larry Block | Producers: Steven Bernhardt, Derek Power, Mace Neufeld, Mark L. Lester | Music: John Beal | Editing: Jack Hofstra | Cinematography: Andrew Laszlo | Release Date: March 13, 1981, Universal

Cross-references: Cherry (Universal horror, hybridity, intertextuality, Gothic), Hawkins (ghosts, Gothic tropes), Lowenstein (aging), Woofter (disaffected youth, American Gothic)

POLTERGEIST

1982

Writers: Steven Spielberg, Michael Grais, Mark Victor | Producers: Frank Marshall, Steven Spielberg | Music: Jerry Goldsmith | Editing: Michael Kahn | Cinematography: Matthew F. Leonetti | Release Date: June 4, 1982, MGM/UA

Cross-references: Cherry (hybridity, intertextuality, Gothic), Hawkins (authorship, family, Gothic), Martin (authorship), Sederholm (late capitalism, labor), Woofter (disaffected youth)

LIFEFORCE

1985

Writers: Dan O'Bannon, Don Jakoby | Producers: Yoram Globus, Menahem Golan | Music: Henry Mancini | Editing: John Grover | Cinematography: Alan Hume | Release Date: June 21, 1985, Cannon Films / TriStar

Cross-references: Cherry (Hammer horror, hybridity, intertextuality, Gothic), Lowenstein (aging, vampirism), Olney (patriarchal capitalism, production context, Thatcher era), Sharrett (cosmic horror, Lovecraft)

INVADERS FROM MARS

1986

Writers: Dan O'Bannon, Don Jakoby | Producers: Edward L. Alperson Jr., Menahem Golan, Yoram Globus, David Rogers, Wade H. Williams III | Music: Christopher Young, Sylvester Levay, David Storrs | Editing: Alain Jakubowicz | Cinematography: Daniel Pearl | Release Date: June 6, 1986, Cannon Film Distributors

Cross-references: introduction (media critique, entertainment industry), Cherry (hybridity, intertextuality, Gothic), Olney (patriarchal capitalism, production context, Reagan era), Woofter (disaffected youth, childhood)

THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE 2

1986

Writer: L. M. Kit Carson | Producers: Menahem Golan, Yoram Globus | Music: Tobe Hooper, Jerry Lambert | Editing: Alain Jakubowicz | Cinematography: Richard Kooris | Release Date: August 22, 1986, Cannon Releasing

Cross-references: Cherry (hybridity, intertextuality, Gothic), Dodson (masculinity), Lowenstein (aging), Olney (patriarchal capitalism, production context, Reagan era), Sharrett (Reagan era)

SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION

1990

Writers: Tobe Hooper, Howard Goldberg | Producers: Henry Bushkin, Sanford Hampton, Jerrold W. Lambert, Jim Rogers, Arthur M. Sarkissian | Music: Graeme Revell | Editing: David Kern | Cinematography: Levie Isaacks | Release Date: February 23, 1990, Taurus Entertainment

Cross-references: Dodson (masculinity), Thain (affect, human exceptionalism)

I'M DANGEROUS TONIGHT

1990

Writers: Bruce Lansbury, Philip John Taylor | Producers: Boris Malden, Bruce Lansbury, Philip John Taylor | Music: Nicholas Pike | Editing: Carl Kress | Cinematography: Levie Isaacks | Release Date: August 8, 1990, USA Network / MCA

Cross-references: Cherry (hybridity, intertextuality, Gothic), Taylor (abject past, Gothic)

NIGHT TERRORS (TOBE HOOPER'S NIGHT TERRORS)

1993, 1995

Writers: Daniel Matmor, Rom Globus | Producer: Harry Alan Towers | Music: Dov Seltzer | Editing: Alain Jakubowicz | Cinematography: Amnon Solamon | Release Date: May 30, 1993, Dylan Dog Horror Fest (Italy); September 19, 1995, United States (video release only), Global Pictures / Golan-Globus Productions

Cross-reference: Taylor (abject past, Gothic)

BODY BAGS: "Eye" (segment)

1993

Writers: Billy Brown, Dan Angel | Producers: Dan Angel, John Carpenter, Sandy King | Music: John Carpenter, Jim Lang | Editing: Edward A. Warschilka | Cinematography: Gary B. Kibbe | Release Date: August 8, 1993, Showtime Networks

Cross-references: Dodson (masculinity), Taylor (abject past, Gothic)

THE MANGLER

1995

Writers: Tobe Hooper, Stephen David Brooks, Peter Welbeck (Harry Alan Towers) | Producer: Anant Singh | Music: Barrington Pheloung | Editing:

David Heitner | Cinematography: Amnon Salomon | Release Date: March 3, 1995, New Line Cinema

Cross-references: Dillard (production context), Sederholm (labor, late capitalism, American Gothic)

THE APARTMENT COMPLEX

1999

Writer: Karl Schaefer | Producer: Scott McAboy | Music: Mark Adler | Editing: Andy Horvitch | Cinematography: Jacques Haitkin | Release Date: October 31, 1999, Showtime

Cross-references: Golden and Woofert (unsettled space [and in notes]), Taylor (abject past, Gothic)

CROCODILE

2000

Writers: Jace Anderson, Adam Gierasch, Michael D. Weiss | Producers: Dany Dimbort, Eddy Chamichian, Avi Lerner, Trevor Short, et al. | Music: Serge Colbert | Editing: Andy Horvitch, Alain Jakubowicz | Cinematography: Eliot Rockett | Release Date: December 26, 2000, Nu Image / Trimark Home Video (video release only)

Cross-references: Cherry (southern Gothic [note]), Thorn (human exceptionalism, animal horror)

TOOLBOX MURDERS

2004

Writers: Jace Anderson, Adam Gierasch | Producers: Tony DiDio, Gary LaPoten, Terence S. Potter, Jacqueline Quella | Music: Joseph Conlan | Editing: Andrew Cohen | Cinematography: Steve Yedlin | Release Date: March 19, 2004 (Germany); March 14, 2005, Lionsgate Films (video)

Cross-references: DeGiglio-Bellemare (borders, liminality), Golden and Woofert (unsettled space, architecture, avant-garde), Martin (Hollywood, Gothic woman's film, urban wyrd)

MORTUARY

2005

Writers: Jace Anderson, Adam Geirasch | Producers: Tony DiDio, E. L. Katz, Peter Katz, Alan Somers | Music: Joseph Conlan | Editing: Andrew Cohen | Cinematography: Jaron Presant | Release Date: October 21, 2005, New York City Horror Film Festival

Cross-references: Cherry (hybridity, intertextuality, Gothic), Sederholm (labor), Woofter (disaffected youth, cosmic horror, Lovecraft, postindustrial degeneration, human exceptionalism)

DJINN

2013

Writer: David Tully | Producers: Daniela Tully, Tim Smythe | Music: BC Smith | Editing: Andrew Cohen, Mark Stevens | Cinematography: Joel Ransom | Release Date: October 25, 2013, Abu Dhabi Film Festival

Cross-reference: Golden and Woofter (unsettled space, architecture, politicized space)

TELEVISION PILOTS, EPISODES, AND SHORT FILMS

THE HEISTERS (fiction short)

1964

Writers: Michael England, Tobe Hooper | Producers: Michael England, Tobe Hooper | Music: Ezra Rachlin | Editing: Tobe Hooper | Cinematography: Ronald Perryman | Release Date: 1964

Cross-references: Dodson (masculinity), Williams (avant-garde strategies)

DOWN FRIDAY STREET (experimental documentary short)

1966

Writer: Tobe Hooper | Producer: Tobe Hooper | Music: Ray Lynch | Editing: Tobe Hooper | Cinematography: Tobe Hooper | Release Date: 1966

Cross-references: Golden and Woofter (unsettled space, avant-garde strategies), Williams (avant-garde strategies)

DANCING WITH MYSELF (music video short)

1983

Writer: Keith Williams | Producer: Parallax Productions | Music: Billy Idol, Tony James | Editing: Tobe Hooper | Cinematography: Daniel Pearl | Release Date: 1983, MTV

Cross-reference: Metz (celebrity, production, industry)

AMAZING STORIES (1985–1987, TV series, 2 seasons)**“Miss Stardust” (season 2, episode 21)**

1987

Writers: Thomas E. Szollosi, Richard Christian Matheson | Producers: Stephen Semel, Steven Spielberg, Steve Starkey | Music: John Mayer | Editing: Charles Minsky | Cinematography: Joe Ann Fogle | Airdate: April 10, 1987, NBC

Cross-reference: introduction (media critique)

THE EQUALIZER (1985–1989, TV series, 4 seasons)**“No Place Like Home” (season 3, episode 18)**

1988

Writer: Robert Eisele | Creator-Producers: Michael Sloan, Richard Lindheim | Music: John Cacavas | Editing: Richard P. Cirincione, Gary Karr | Cinematography: Geoffrey Erb | Airdate: March 16, 1988, CBS

Cross-reference: introduction (documentary aesthetic, masculinity, neo-liberal critique)

FREDDY’S NIGHTMARES (1988–1990, TV series, 2 seasons)**“No More Mr. Nice Guy” (season 1, episode 1)**

1988

Writers: Michael De Luca, David Ehrman, Rhet Topham | Producers: Robert Shaye, Jeff Freilich | Music: Nicholas Pike (theme) | Editing: Andrew Klein | Cinematography: David Calloway | Airdate: October 9, 1988, syndicated, Lorimar Telepictures, Warner Bros. Television Distribution

Cross-references: introduction (director as intertext), Cherry (hybridity, intertextuality)

HAUNTED LIVES: TRUE GHOST STORIES (1991–1992 [1995–1996 as REAL GHOSTS], 3-episode TV pseudodocumentary miniseries)**“Ghosts R Us / Legend of Kate Morgan / School Spirit” (episode 1)**

1991

Writers: Peter M. Lenkov, A. L. Katz, Gilbert Adler, David Braff | Producer-Creators: Bruce Nash, Allan Zullo | Music: Nicholas Pike | Editing: Jonathan Moser, Jonathan E. Moser | Cinematography: Levie Isaacks | Airdate: May 15, 1991, CBS, UPN (1995–1996)

Cross-reference: introduction (media critique, uncanny technology)

TALES FROM THE CRYPT (1989–1996, cable series, 7 seasons)**“Dead Wait” (season 3, episode 6)**

1991

Writers: Gilbert Adler, A. L. Katz | Producers: Richard Donner, David Giler, Walter Hill, Joel Silver, Robert Zemeckis | Music: Danny Elfman (theme), David Mansfield (episode) | Editing: Stanley Wohlberg | Cinematography: Levie Isaacks | Airdate: July 3, 1991, HBO

Cross-reference: Dodson (masculinity)

NOWHERE MAN (1995–1996, TV series, 1 season)**“Absolute Zero” (Pilot)**

1995

Writer-Creator: Lawrence Herzog | Producers: Lawrence Herzog, Peter Dunne, Stan Rogow, Joel Surnow | Music: Mark Snow | Editing: Andrew Cohen | Cinematography: Isidore Mankofsky | Airdate: August 28, 1995, UPN

Cross-reference: introduction (masculinity, neoliberal critique)

“Turnabout” (season 1, episode 2)

1995

Writer-Creator: Lawrence Herzog | Producers: Lawrence Herzog, Peter Dunne, Stan Rogow, Joel Surnow | Music: Mark Snow | Editing: Andrew Cohen | Cinematography: Ric Waite | Airdate: September 4, 1995, UPN

Cross-reference: introduction (masculinity, neoliberal critique)

DARK SKIES (1996, TV series, 1 season)**“The Awakening” (Pilot)**

1996

Writers: Brent V. Friedman, Bryce Zabel | Producers: Brent V. Friedman, James D. Parriott, Joseph Stern, Bryce Zabel | Music: Michael Hoenig | Editing: Andrew Cohen | Cinematography: Bill Butler | Airdate: September 21, 1996, NBC

Cross-reference: introduction (director as intertext)

PERVERSIONS OF SCIENCE (1997, cable series, 1 season)**“Panic” (episode 7)**

1997

Writer: Andrew Kevin Walker | Producers: Richard Donner, David Giler, Walter Hill, Joel Silver, Robert Zemeckis | Music: Danny Elfman (theme), Mark Mothersbaugh (episode) | Editing: Stanley Wohlberg | Cinematography: Rick Bota | Airdate: July 2, 1997, HBO

Cross-reference: introduction (hoax, media critique)

PREY (1998, TV series, 1 season)**“Hungry for Survival” (Pilot, unaired)**

1998

Writer-Creator: William Schmidt | Producers: Charlie Craig, William Schmidt

| Music: Laura Karpman | Editing: Andrew Cohen | Airdate: unaired, ABC

Cross-reference: introduction (in notes)

THE OTHERS (2000, TV series, 1 season)**“Souls on Board” (episode 4)**

2000

Writer: Daniel Arkin | Creators: John Brancato, Michael Ferris | Producers:

Glen Morgan, James Wong | Music: Shirley Walker | Editing: Maryann Bran-

don | Cinematography: Shelly Johnson | Airdate: December 2, 2000, NBC

Cross-reference: introduction (unsettled space, uncanny technology)

NIGHT VISIONS (2001–2002, TV series, 1 season)**“The Maze” (segment of episode 11, “The Maze / Harmony”)**

2001

Writer: Steve Aspis | Creator-Producers: Dan Angel, Billy Brown | Music:

George S. Clinton (theme), Frank Macchia | Editing: Michael Ruscio, Bill

Luciano, Michael D. Ornstein | Cinematography: Andreas Poulsson | Airdate:

July 12, 2001, Fox Network

Cross-references: introduction (unsettled space), Golden and Woofert
(unsettled space [in notes])**“Cargo” (segment of episode 12, “Cargo / Switch”)**

2002

Writer: Harry Dunn | Creator-Producers: Dan Angel, Billy Brown | Music:

George S. Clinton (theme), Frank Macchia | Editing: Michael Ruscio, Bill

Luciano, Michael D. Ornstein | Cinematography: Andreas Poulsson | Airdate:

September 23, 2002, Sci-Fi Channel

Cross-reference: introduction (unsettled space)

SHADOW REALM (2002, anthology film)**“The Maze” (segment)**

2002

Writer: Steve Aspis | Producers: Dan Aspis, Steve Angel, Billy Brown, Naren

Shankar | Music: George S. Clinton | Editing: Ken Bornstein, Michael Russo,

Robert L. Sinise | Cinematography: Andreas Poulsson | Airdate: July 27, 2002,

Sci-Fi Channel (originally aired in the series *Night Visions*)Cross-reference: see the entry for *Night Visions*

TAKEN (2002, 10-episode cable miniseries)**“Beyond the Sky” (episode 1)**

2002

Writer-Creator: Leslie Bohem | Producers: Joe M. Aguilar, Steve Beers, Leslie Bohem, Darryl Frank, Steven Spielberg | Music: Laura Karpman | Editing: Toni Morgan | Cinematography: Jonathan Freeman, Joel Ransom | Airdate: December 2, 2002, Sci-Fi Channel

Cross-references: introduction (antinostalgia), Woofter (disillusioned youth [in notes])

MASTERS OF HORROR (2005–2007, cable series, 2 seasons)**“Dance of the Dead” (season 1, episode 3)**

2005

Writer: Richard Christian Matheson | Creator-Producer: Mick Garris | Music: Billy Corgan | Editing: Andrew Cohen | Cinematography: Jon Joffin | Airdate: November 11, 2005, Showtime Networks

Cross-reference: Metz (post-9/11, late capitalism)

“The Damned Thing” (season 2, episode 1)

2006

Writer: Richard Christian Matheson | Creator-Producer: Mick Garris | Music: Nicholas Pike | Editing: Andrew Cohen | Cinematography: Jon Joffin | Airdate: October 27, 2006, Showtime Networks

Cross-reference: Dodson (masculinity)

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